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ASTRID



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ASTRID

‘La Reine au Sourire.’

ASTRID

‘La Reine au Sourire’

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TO
PRINCESS JOSEPHINE-CHARLOTTE ;
PRINCE BAUDOUIN :
PRINCE ALBERT OF LIÈGE :
THIS BOOK
WHEREIN THEIR MOTHER STILL SMILES

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“ What is a Queen ? ” asked the little peasant.

“ A Queen,” was the reply, “ is a Mother who cares not merely for her own family, but also for the families of others.”

CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF BLUE LAKES

THE roll of the drum could be heard long before the guard came into sight—'Rat-a-tat, One, Two!' 'Rat-a-tat, One, Two!'—whilst, quick as thought, the little Princess ran to the window.

The first soldier in the second rank was just like the fearless Tin Soldier in the story-book, who threw himself in the fire to save the China Shepherdess, or so the Nuns used to say, and, after all, *they* knew how to read.

There it was again—'Rat-a-tat, One, Two!' 'Rat-a-tat, One, Two!'

The soldier marching at the head of the column made her think of General Goat's-Head. She didn't quite know why he should, unless it was his beautiful uniform, though, even then, it wasn't as beautiful as the one her father wore.

That was the colour of the sky before the stars came out—no wonder Stockholm knew him as 'The Blue Prince.'

Her mother, Princess Ingeborg, who adored children (she had four), was known as 'Sun-

beam,' for wherever she went she brought the sunshine with her!

The little Princess who watched the guard go marching past her window was the youngest of her three daughters and was given the name of Astrid, which means a star: in Swedish it also means 'Ready-to-give-one's-heart.'

Indeed she was already becoming known as a cheerful giver.

'Rat-a-tat, One, Two!'

General Goat's-Head, hot and bothered, was still to be seen leading the troops, and Astrid, her little nose pressed against the windowpane, smiled happily as he went by. The music became fainter and fainter as the guard drew nearer to the royal castle.

The little Princess turned away and went back to her toys.

* * *

One day her father, who had written a book about his travels in foreign countries, was reading it to his little daughters. Astrid, who was listening in astonishment, said to herself: 'How I should love to see those countries, I wonder if I ever shall?'

Sometimes her mother took her up in her arms to show her the gulls being blown back to land by the wind from the Baltic. She never watched their flight without wishing that she could fly to and fro over the sea. In

her heart of hearts, however, she thought that no country could be as fascinating as her native Sweden, and what other land had once been a huge butterfly with wings as large as lakes?

When animals and men were taller than they are now, so ran the old legend she had heard a hundred times, there was once a butterfly several miles long. One day, when it ventured to cross the Baltic, its fragile, transparent wings were carried away by the winds and waves and the poor thing fell into the sea.

Washed aground near the coast of Småland, its body was turned into a long, narrow rock. But because Nature always tries to make a thing of beauty, even out of a stone, it was not long before the wind brought seeds to the bare rock and the rock-rose flowered on the sedge.

Where the earth lay thickest corn and trees had grown until, little by little, villages and presbyteries were built and fishermen's hamlets and towns grew up. So Sweden was born.

When our little Princess opened her atlas she had no difficulty in convincing herself that all this was true. Sweden looked just like a butterfly, with its round head and narrow waist to the north and its abdomen which spread and then tapered to a point in the south.

She was quite sure that nowhere else were such pretty bays to be found as those where the Swedish ships were rocking at anchor. Nowhere else were there such beautiful forests of pine or silver birches like those she saw trembling at the least breath of wind in the park. Where else could one find such gracious windmills as those of Scanie, and where else were the winters so bright and gay as those of Sweden?

Could there exist anywhere else a people as lively, as gay and as nimble as the Swedes? Even if there were countries so beautiful and so out of the ordinary, they none of them possessed the green lakes of Sweden where the blue shades alternated with the gold.

So much did she love the lakes with their flights of curlew and plover that she would have asked nothing better for her eyes to rest on from the first thing in the morning to the last thing at night. Even her eyes themselves were like her country's lakes: green and blue with golden lights, so clear and limpid that one saw in their depths the need to give.

* * *

That evening the little Princess opened *The Marvellous Voyage of Nils Holgersson Across Sweden*, which tells of its legends. She paused at the passage recounting the dance of the cranes on their playground of heather and read slowly to herself:

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‘ All those who had wings and those who had none aspired to rise above the clouds and seek that which lay behind them ; to abandon the heavy body which dragged them earthwards and to fly away towards heaven. . . .’

CHAPTER II

THE SMILE IN THE MINIATURE

MAY had set the birds rehearsing their love-songs in the woods, while the sun—growing warmer every day—was helping the leaves to uncurl. A tender green began to creep over the whole of the park and when the buds burst it was a sure sign that the violets and anemones would soon be flowering. The little Princess was as care-free and happy as any butterfly. On approaching the castle she had seen that the drawing-room windows were open and was able to glimpse the stately statue of the 'Blue Prince' from the outside.

Astrid would have been puzzled to say why she was always so happy in this room. Perhaps it was because Hans Andersen's lovely stories, written in her uncle's country of Denmark, insisted that even the trinkets and furniture lived a life of their own. She often stood in front of the silver *samovar*, enthroned in state on the mahogany table, and thought of the wonderful stories it told to the porcelain

figures that lived in the glass cabinet, but only when everyone else had gone to sleep. As for the lovely lace that spread its snowy web beneath the *samovar* there could be no doubting the fact that it had been woven by an elf more skilful by far than all the others.

What she could *not* believe was that she herself was a Fairy-child, even though Baroness Surcouf (who had asked to meet Astrid and her elder sister Martha) had said, while they were making their curtsies, that they had the ethereal grace of Fairy-children.

The Baroness, looking in turn at the smiling father of the two little Princesses, at the little girls themselves, dressed all in white, leaning on the arm of their mother's arm-chair, and at the flowers around the room, found it all a charming picture.

She caught herself looking hard at Astrid, trying to recall where she had seen eyes of that uncommon shape before. Suddenly there came back to her mind a miniature of the Empress Josephine, with that same look of wonder, and she remembered.

Astrid knew all about the Empress Josephine, not only from the Baroness, but because her portrait was in every Swedish home. The story of her life was full of enchantment in spite of its unhappy ending, which, however, could not alter the fact that at her death she

left the world a better and a happier place. In truth 'She was an enchanting person.'

Astrid suddenly turned to the Baroness and said, with a look of the Empress in her eyes : ' Madam, I want to be like her ! '

CHAPTER III

A SUMMER GARDEN

EVERY night now the nightingale was beginning to sing, and its voice, like that of its brother-singer in the story which enthralled the old Emperor of China, was as sweet as a mother's kiss.

The little Princess with her parents, her two sisters and her brother were spending the summer at the castle with the beautiful name of Fridhem or 'The House of Peace,' and, as usual, all the shutters were open.

Astrid was delighted to find that the big trees were still there under which she used to play and sew. The great oak still seemed like a good giant who had escaped from the forest just for the joy of watching over the games of a little girl in a garden.

Her needle flashed in and out as she got on with her embroidery. She wished she knew how to do the fine work like the marvellous smocks, for instance, of the embroiderers of the Värmland. The afternoon was not quite so hot when she rejoined her sisters

and her friends on the tennis court. Quickly and lightly she received and returned the balls. The Empress Josephine must have displayed the same grace when she played at shuttlecock with her ladies-of-honour in the park of Saint Cloud.

As Astrid wandered round the flower-beds in the evening, when the flowers give out their full scent, they seemed to her to be so many living creatures. She put her little nose into their calices so that she might the better breathe in their spirit. When she saw that they drooped their open corollas she thought perhaps, like little Ida in the old Norse story, that they were tired out with having danced too much the night before at 'The Dance of the Flowers.'

The next day the birds woke her at dawn. She had hardly opened her eyes before her heart jumped for joy at the thought of all the amusements waiting to mark this new day with a succession of happy little white mile-stones.

* * *

First, she might go for a drive in her father's car.

Joyfully Astrid settled herself on the cushions and spread out the pleats of her white dress. It was such fun to go fast! Houses and fields, men and cattle rushed past like magic pictures. When she turned

round they were only little motionless specks on the horizon. Still faster they went, the ribbon of the road unwinding as though it would never end until it reached 'The Land of Heart's Desire.'

Carried away by the powerful machine she entered into the giddy realm of speed. She held her breath as her brown curls danced in the wind. It seemed as if even the engine itself was saying: 'Fairy-child! Fairy-child! Fairy-child! . . .'

Perhaps it was true after all.

This must be the magic carpet of the Merchant of Baghdad, for, as far as the eye could reach, all this country-side, everything in fact, belonged to her.

However, the motor was slowing down. They had come to a barrier. Before the chauffeur had put on the brakes the little Princess had opened the door. She jumped lightly from the car and ran to the barrier to open it.

The chauffeur apologised for being so slow, it was not for Princesses to open gates.

'Why,' said Astrid in astonishment, 'when I am with my Father I always get out to open the gate. He says I ought to be able to manage that at least.' With this she gave him such a lovely smile that he settled himself at the wheel as happily as though someone had slipped a treasure into the pocket of his uniform.

A little house had been built for the little Princess to play in at the bottom of the summer garden. They had great fun there as all the furniture had been made to their size. It was so amusing to pretend to be the mistress of the house, to sweep the floor, to clean the windows and to light the fire.

Astrid took her dolls there, and Heaven knows she had plenty. Every time her uncle, the King of Sweden, came back from Nice, his favourite little niece could be sure that her family would be the larger for a chocolate baby or a china doll. She was a real little mother; attentive and careful.

That day Princess Ingeborg had allowed her to invite her little friends, on the condition, however, that she should taste her own confectionery before offering any to her guests. What a bustle there was in the little house in the summer garden! The cook, covered in a long pinafore, leaning over her saucepans, busied herself for several hours in preparing the most delicious menu. She made some cakes and also some light Swedish pancakes called 'Smorbrods.'

The coffee was simply marvellous, and the guests departed ready to proclaim their hostess a future 'Blue Ribbon of Cookery.'

Astrid was flushed with joy from the pleasure she had got in serving others. When the plates were washed up and everything put away she ran across the lawn, a little fresh

cream on her cuff like a white hem and the long apron whipping her bare knees. She had been longing to tell her mother what a good housewife she meant to be.

* * *

Nothing is more amusing, on a beautiful summer day, than to lie on ones tummy on the edge of a stream and watch someone fishing for crayfish : a pleasure without which Fridhem would not have been Fridhem. The ' Blue Prince ' took his landing-nets ; Astrid insisting on carrying the basket, which she lined with leaves.

It was tremendous fun to watch for the little blue-black creatures. First could be seen their antennæ, then their eyes, placed on top of their heads, like pearls. Though they went sideways the crayfish ran away sometimes with surprising speed.

The little Princess did not hesitate to take off her shoes and pull up her skirts to go into the river. She was not afraid of getting a pinch from a crayfish nor of the stones on the bottom. Really, what was there to fear when one was a happy little Princess in the shadow of the ' Blue Prince ' ?

* * *

These, however, were not all the pleasures that Fridhem had to offer.

There was the forest, which speaks to the soul of every little Scandinavian, and Astrid knew it for an old friend who made up strange songs and stories for the children. How many times the Princess Ingeborg, or the 'Blue Prince,' had taken the Princesses and their brother to picnic in the heart of the forest! They would sit down near a spring: Astrid seeing first of all to the comfort of the others. She herself served the cumin cheese, the smorbrods and the sandwiches of smoked reindeer. One would have said that a little elf had scrambled down from the highest tree, scattering good-will and jollity over the festive cloth.

One afternoon, when the summer was lovely as music itself, she had gone for a walk in the forest with her sister. They had a gorgeous time. Sometimes their hair was caught on the lower branches of the pine-trees: the gossamer making them unexpected hair nets.

They had been wandering some time without realising that the hours were slipping by. Already the sun had gained the tops of the trees, but the little Princesses did not notice it. They were too fascinated listening to the shy and mysterious calls answering each other in the soft air; listening to the murmur of wings and of dreams; the plots of dwarfs and the whisperings of fairies. Who knew but Queen Mab herself would pass by in her

silver chariot? The bees would dance about her in a ring: a dance of violoncello and pale gold. There was already a joyous twittering in the undergrowth.

The little Princesses were really a little tired, having walked so far; but they hardly realised it. The pine trees were beginning, as they did each night, to rehearse the slumber-song they would sing the day their hearts were broken so that the cradles of little children might be hollowed out of them, and the knowledge of their fate affected them so much that they wept tears of resin and of love.

The shadows deepened and the stunted old trees began to look like little gnomes now that the light was only a golden mist in the heart of the forest. Then the Princesses knew that night was not far off. They hurried to get back to the road, but they had walked so much that they could no longer hurry. Astrid thought of their mother's anxiety.

In the distance they could hear a motor hooting, and soon a big lorry came into sight. They stopped it and asked for a lift—such a chance was certainly not to be missed! They bumped up and down; it went so fast, the noise of the engine making it impossible to hear each other speak. Although this was not the 'Blue Prince's' silent, sweetly-running machine, Astrid was thrilled by the unexpectedness of the ride.

As they came to the edge of the forest, alongside fields bathed in twilight, the driver slowed down in order to question his happy, little companions.

“ Well, after all that, where are you going to, my dears ? ”

Astrid, opening wide her candid eyes, replied : ‘ Fridhem.’

The driver was so astounded he nearly let go of the wheel.

‘ What—to Fridhem ! ’ Why, then, he had given real Princesses a lift in his lorry. And what Princesses ! The daughters of the ‘ Blue Prince ’ and of ‘ Princess Sunbeam ’ !

The good man had no time to recover from the shock before the girls were shaking him by the hand to express their gratitude. Lighter than an elf, Astrid jumped down from the seat and went her way, looking back several times to reward the lorry-driver with a dazzling smile.

* * *

August was nearly over.

How far off were the bonfires of Saint Valborghe that were lit to greet the return of the good season ! Soon the verdure of the lovely garden would be tinged with gold and purple. The migratory birds would not be long now preparing for their flight. The wild geese and the descendants of old Akka de Kebne-

kaise would go over in wedges across a sky edged with the mists of Autumn. The men would soon go to the marshlands to shoot game, and the 'Blue Prince' would take Astrid on other exciting expeditions when she would have grown still bigger. To grow up. Would she not be a little Princess all her life?

But skirts must be lengthened and lesson books were becoming more and more difficult. Next November she would be celebrating her eighth birthday. There would be the traditional cake with candles and flowers, and on that day Astrid would be 'Queen of the Table.' Her uncle the King would probably be shooting elk, but he would certainly not forget his little niece. The shutters of Fridhem would be closed and the flowers in the border would be dead.

Rather sadly, Astrid caressed the carnations and the pink daisies with the tips of her fingers, but before she had made the round of the garden her brave smile was back again, full of love for the things which die only to be born again to greater beauty.

She leaned down to pick some roses, and in her eyes was the same tender colour of the roses one picks in August at the second flowering.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECRET OF ETERNAL YOUTH

Two, three, four green fir trees from the forest had been planted in a tub, decorated with crystal bowls and glass arrows, tinsel and golden stars and a thousand candles. They were destined to meet their fate in a glowing blaze of glory.

Many Christmases had gone by, but, strange to relate, nobody in the 'Blue Prince's' family seemed to grow any older. Baroness Surcouf had met 'Princess Sunbeam' on the Côte d'Azur and had found her as young and as radiant as on the day of her visit to the Swedish Castle. 'The Blue Prince' looked as slim and straight as ever in his fine uniform, while Martha and Marghareta, although they were now tall young ladies, had the freshness of those flowers one gathers on the mountain-sides of Uppland.

Astrid had kept her childlike innocence and her golden dreams. She was still the 'Princess of the Legend,' and it wove about her a veil of dreams—the veil that protects eternal youth.

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For she was the Princess of Stockholm, and all Stockholm remembered the beautiful Undine with her sea-green dress and her sea-green eyes ; Undine whose blood had mixed with the waters to give them that tender glow, that unexpected sweetness and that strange power to draw folk to the sea.

In the beginning the fisherfolk had settled along the beckoning rivers, pursued by the dream of him, Huldbrand, among them who had loved Undine. Then the servants of God had been attracted in their turn and they had built the churches. There had been the Grey Friars and the Black Friars and the sisters of Saint Claire. A sanctuary had been raised there so that men might the better realise how human nature was blessed and what were the privileges of the fragile body and the sensitive soul.

The narrow city was transformed into a vast stretch of houses and gardens. The church of the Grey Friars became the sepulchre of the Kings of Sweden. God and the Kings ; the servants of God and of Kings. Stockholm possessed the power of attracting everyone.

The young Princess loved the town that guarded the treasure of the past. She knew the Skansen, where all the things of old times are reunited : the old houses where the people dance the ancient dances in the dress of long ago, the fiddlers' violins and the violas of the saga-tellers.

Astrid was now like someone who had walked out of the Saga of Stockholm : ' The Fairy-child.' She went about in every quarter of the city as happy as the day was long. And sometimes, on the heights from where one can see the waves that have a pearly colour and a liveliness that is without equal, Astrid came to dream of all these things.

But the ' Princess Sunbeam ' who had no more little children to bring up now, thought more than ever about other people's babies. She had founded a school of a kind which, as yet, did not exist anywhere else in the world : a school where young Swedish girls could learn to dress, to bathe and to take care of tiny babies, so that one day they could become capable and attentive mothers.

' The Blue Prince,' who wished that everyone might suffer less from illnesses and calamities, thought that people should learn more of the virtue of water which baptises and washes, purifies and heals, also of the rules of hygiene which drive away dust and microbes. He was at the head of the Red Cross, and he was always to be found where his presence was most needed by the sick and suffering.

Astrid often went to the school where the babies were looked after, and adored them. Her dolls were sleeping in a cupboard now. She *had* been very fond of them, but since she had nursed real babies on her knee, changed their clothes and warmed their

feeding-bottles, she understood better the meaning of her dreams and the joy of life.

She had become the friend of the children and the poor, the true Princess of the Legend, the Princess of Stockholm. It was just because the 'Princess Sunbeam,' the 'Blue Prince' and the young Princesses did all these good and beautiful things that one never saw them grow older, for it is love that keeps hearts young and eyes bright.

CHAPTER V

IN THE FLOATING CITY

MARTHA, the second daughter of Princess Ingeborg, was one of those model young girls found more often in books than in real life. She did everything so well that one knew the fairies invited to her baptism had been very generous in their gifts.

Marghareta, the eldest, had other virtues : fragrant with charming fancies.

Astrid adored Marghareta and had a tender affection for Martha.

It was not without a few qualms that the little Princess prepared herself to enter the domestic school where her sisters had left such a reputation of perfection. However, everything turned out much better than she expected. The young cook who had given such a successful tea-party continued to show astonishing talent.

She had to take her cookery course seriously, for one didn't learn how merely to make cream cakes. First of all she had to know how to make real soup, and Stockholm soup

was made with vegetables that had to be bought in the market, then properly sliced and cleaned.

The first market! Astrid would always remember it! How was she to be sure that the bunch of celery was really fresh or that the cauliflower had not been eaten by insects? The young Princess turned the vegetables from side to side and back again, terribly embarrassed. And the market-woman was not at all pleased, dear me, no! She took the bunch from the hands of the would-be housewife, saying rudely: 'You don't understand anything about it—what's the use of hesitating so much?'

Two students of the cookery school coming home arm-in-arm, in consequence, had very red cheeks, although they were laughing heartily.

The order had been given for 'potatoes.' Those responsible for the job were grumbling: it was so dull. Then Astrid generously volunteered her services, and, with a smile, peeled enough for the twenty pupils of her division.

When her daughter knew enough about cooking, Princess Ingeborg confided to her a secret which had come down from her grandmother: the secret of the cherry tart. A famous cherry tart—all the more famous because it was the secret of a Princess.

Astrid was never idle in the house where everyone was loved.

'What is Astrid doing?' someone would cry.

The answer was certain to be the same every time. 'She is either sewing or embroidering.' You see, the Princess was a fairy, and everyone knows that fairy fingers are extraordinarily clever. Nothing pleased her more than to make the very best out of a piece of stuff. In her drawers were many paper patterns. Sticking out her tongue a little, the Princess used to cut them out with a large pair of scissors.

Alas! she thought, she was far from making such lovely dresses as those she admired, standing in front of a shop in the Hamngaten, in the smartest quarter of Stockholm! The big shops, with their fairyland of colours; the play of light on the gleaming stuffs; the lifts that transported you from one sparkling display to another as in a dream—all this fascinated her.

However, she was not a Princess who could buy everything she wanted. She had neither a fabulous fortune nor a magic wand. But a thing of beauty quickly enchanted her eyes and enriched her heart. Thus everything she loved, even although she might not possess it, became for her a treasure.

The little Princess had so pure a nature it seemed only fitting she should be born and bred in 'The Land of Snow.'

As soon as 'Goodman Winter' gave the signal, all the young people of Stockholm made a rush for the frozen lakes. The lake was soon covered with fantastic arabesques and joyous parties. Flushed and wrapped in furs, the girls slid along on their shining skates, holding out their hands to the boys and dancing quadrilles with them.

Others went to the mountains to enjoy the pleasures of lugging or of the skielkes or bob-sleighs. To take these sledges down the sharply-curving slopes needs great skill, especially on the corners, where the body and the sleigh must move as one. The amusement of the dizzy descent, however, only comes as a reward for the effort of the climb. That is why the echoes of the boys' songs are heard so often in the mountains as they drag their bob-sleighs by a rope towards the heights.

The skiers, too, were often to be seen carried along like lightning on their long, wooden skis. Some of them were able to make such huge jumps that it looked as though they would finish up in the clouds huddled together on the peaks of the mountains. Astrid shared the keenness of all her countrymen for these healthy and beautiful sports; beautiful because they bestow the sense of harmony

and rhythm ; healthy by reason of the needed effort and discipline.

She loved the snow, and as the snow of her country stands for joy and beauty it is not difficult to guess the whereabouts of the ' Princess of the Snows ' at this time of year.

Stockholm, the ' Floating Town,' made one think of a majestic swan that cleaves the waters of a quiet lake, and because the pleasures of winter and everyday work were more alluring there than elsewhere, she remained ' The City of Allurement.'

The Princess, also, was one who allures.

The flowers of her embroidery ; the smile of the fattest baby in the nursery school, whom she had nicknamed ' Mr. Tower ' ; the well-peeled potatoes ; the visits to the shops in the Hamngaten ; ski-ing on the snow ; the rime-frost on the branches in the park ; all this went to make up the joy with which she made others happy.

When many another Princess would have been bored, Astrid was able, from the petty details and the trivial tasks which go to make the daily round, to build up a marvellous existence.

. Oddly enough that reminded one of the legend of Uppland ; that province which had been made from the parts which others had disdained and which she had begged from each of them. Out of such things—edges of fields ; skirts of forest ; tributaries of rivers ;

corners of meadowland ; curves of lakes ; scraps of fjords—Uppland had made the most beautiful and flourishing part of Sweden, and had merited to house the King and Court by her intelligence and wisdom. Since then, there had grown up a Swedish proverb : ‘ Intelligence and wisdom are the qualities which transform beggars into Kings.’

There is also another proverb, written in the Book of God, which says : ‘ Modesty and wisdom are the qualities which change Princesses into Queens.’

CHAPTER VI

THE ECHO OF THE SAGA

ABOUT that time, people were still talking of the war which, for four years, had cast the shadow of death over most of the world. In Astrid's hearing was told the extraordinary story of which the great King of a little people was the hero.

Germany had pronounced the words which condemned Belgium. He who had said to the Germans: 'You shall not pass!' was called ever afterwards 'Albert the Brave.' He had defended his country, bit by bit, flooding some of it rather than surrender. His kingdom, at that moment, was only a footbridge over the waters.

But, under the standard of the King, the cock of Wallonia and the lion of Flanders had united in the fight. They had pushed back the enemy and saved the liberty of the world, and all over the world everyone was talking of this brave people, of their heroic King and his sweet Queen, who had nursed the wounded and had visited the soldiers under fire.

Astrid listened to the wonderful Saga as one listens to a story that is happening in some attractive and marvellous far-away place. The governess who taught her German had one day ventured to uphold Germany and blame France. Anger rose in the Princess's gentle voice :

' You forget, Mademoiselle, that I am a descendant of Bernadotte, the great general who came from over there ! ' And the eyes of Astrid of Sweden were at that moment more than ever like the eyes of Josephine, Empress of the French.

* * *

In the years that followed, the Saga of the Belgians often sang in the heart of the Princess.

She often thought with joy of the knightly King of whom it was said that he was as simple as he was great : to think that the son of the King had been a soldier among the soldiers of his father, when he was only fifteen years old, made her sad.

How many times had she not looked at the pictures from ' over there,' more especially at those of the towns decked out for victory. ' Albert the Great,' re-entering his kingdom at the head of his troops—the Queen seeming to be at his side to give back to Belgium her own dear smile and with it, hope and joy.

The Prince, grave of mien, following on horseback and his brother too, who wanted to be a sailor; their sister Marie-José, the golden-haired. How their people rushed to greet them with cheers and flowers. Even the mothers who had given their all were comforted because of this blessed moment! Astrid looked at these pictures of the Saga and joy filled to overflowing her heart, her life and her home.

* * *

The wedding presents were piling up on the mahogany table, for Marghareta was going to marry a Prince and her joy at being engaged was like a lovely story in blue, the pages of which her young sister turned in raptures. The dreams which floated about the little drawing-room of the castle were blue and gold. As Astrid fingered the sumptuous stuffs which they were sewing for the trousseau she smiled with joy at the thought of the beautiful adventures her sister would so soon be sharing with her princely lover.

As for herself it was not a Prince for whom she waited—not even a crown—but something at once greater, rarer, more secret, more miraculous. Someone to whom she could entrust for ever, in joy and in sorrow, all her woman's heart.

And the 'Princess-ready-to-give-her-heart' said, while she tried on the lace veil which had

belonged to Queens : ' I will love him so much so much. What does all the rest matter ? ' Her eyes were fervent and her smile more alluring than ever. The secret of happiness without end was contained in the simple sentence : it was enough merely to love.

CHAPTER VII

THE LITTLE WATER-NYMPH

PRINCESS 'SUNBEAM' was repainting the gate of the summer garden—a stripe of red paint and one of black. She was not alone at her task, for a very slim young man with wavy, fair hair, the colour of corn, was gaily working away with another paint-brush. A stripe of red paint and one of black. A real painter couldn't have done it better. From time to time Princess Ingeborg went a little way away from the gate to admire it. Nothing now remained but to hang up the traditional notice : ' Wet paint ! '

Suddenly Astrid's clear young laugh floated on the air. As a matter of fact, anyone who wanted to come into the garden would have paid less attention to the notice than to the young man who had hung it up, for, at the moment he was ' the mystery of Fridhem.'

He had really begun, in the Spring, by being the 'mystery of Stockholm.' From that time he had been seen in the house of the ' Blue Prince.' He went there with a

little lady who, in spite of her shortness of stature, had a very regal air and often wore mauve or silvery dresses which went very well with her fair hair and fresh complexion. A single look sufficed to establish the fact that she was the young man's mother.

Those who tried to see what was going on under the great trees must have thought that the mystery would never be solved.

People were frequently meeting this unknown youth on the way to post his own letters and, more mysterious still, they were always addressed in French.

His English, too, had an accent that was neither English nor Swedish.

Monsieur Philippe, as the servants called him, became invisible upon the arrival of a guest at the Castle, sometimes even taking refuge in the attic for several days.

All that seemed strange, and it was even stranger than it appeared. The mystery, in fact, was more beautiful than anyone had imagined. If the fair young man had hidden himself so jealously from the eyes of the world it was because his whole heart and soul was wrapped up in a new discovery calling for secrecy—the secret of happiness!

The unknown was a real Prince, a son of a King. He was very young when he had to don a soldier's uniform and fight alongside the other brave men. Ten years had gone by since then, and now the young hero of

Belgium's immortal Saga, Prince Leopold, had come to Stockholm. He had met the young Princess into whose dreams he had entered without knowing it. She had looked at him, dazzled. He was so like her dreams that she had recognised him at once.

Under the trees in the summer garden they had found each other again, like two friends. When they were together, they noticed that Nature was more beautiful; the flowers had more perfume; the song of the birds more charming and people nicer than when they were away from each other. Astrid led the Prince toward the Forest. She wished to show him the parts she had liked the best, until then: this group of pines, that little dell of birch trees. Now her Forest was transfigured and told a different story from that which she had once come to hear beneath its trees!

The Prince and Princess talked quite naturally between themselves in the language of Wonderland—the language, that is, of the world's most wonderful story. It seemed to Princess Astrid that, like Alice, she had mounted the crystal staircase which leads to the kingdom where everything is wonder and joy. It was as though she, too, had been through the looking-glass and had penetrated into a world where everything was more extraordinary than 'on the other side.' There were moments when she felt she was very

near to having the wings she had wanted so much in her childhood.

The Prince, for his part, whenever he heard Astrid laugh seemed to hear a song more sweet and crystal-clear than all the chimes in all the steeples of Belgium.

Sometimes they sat together, looking at the lake not far from Fridhem.

The sky itself on a summer's day was not so blue as the colour of the Prince's eyes, and those of the Princess had all the light of joy in them, green and gold and like the waters of the lake transparently serene: like those of the water-nymphs who had given to the rivers of Sweden the power to attract all men.

The Prince could very well picture Astrid robed like the nymph in the legend in a long, trailing dress, crowded with pearls and adorned with a bewitching smile. She was there. A more tender glow illumined the lake and gave it an incomparable loveliness.

The Prince loved the Princess and their hearts were given to each other so completely that they made one.

And never did story-teller of old invent any more marvellous story.

CHAPTER VIII

TEARS AND SMILES

IF the band of geese had passed across Stockholm that clear November morning, Nils Holgersson would certainly have asked the big, white gander to fly close, closer to the 'Floating City' to try to find out the reason for the agitation which everywhere prevailed.

The wild geese, however, were no longer anything but a white memory of childhood in the heart of a young Princess twenty years old.

It was the first morning of her wedding festivities. That was why the town was on holiday. The people had come from every corner of Sweden to cheer the daughter of the 'Blue Prince' and of the 'Princess Sunbeam.' Kings and Queens had crossed the seas to be present at the marriage of 'Astrid the Gentle' with 'Leopold the Courageous.'

The bells rang as joyously as they could. All the same a sad note mingled with their glad voices. If it was a day of rejoicing it

was also a day of farewells: Sweden was losing her charming 'Princess of the Snows!' They would never see her any more skating on the lake. They would never see her any more in the streets of Stockholm, in the nursery school nor in the cooking classes. Her friends sighed.

One of the most intimate, who had had to ask permission of her chief before accepting Astrid's invitation to be present at the ceremony, sighed more than all the others.

And the knightly King, as he went to greet the dawn, told himself that Astrid would always be Sweden's well-beloved Princess and that heart (of which she was a part) rejoiced as Father and King.

* * *

For the last time Astrid looked at the familiar things among which she had lived: the piano where she had played duets with her brother; the round table; the little desk where she had written under the gentle light of the lamp and the library where slept, shut away in books, so many little people of enchantments and of dreams. She knew them all by name: Alice; Nils Holgersson; the little girl with the matches; the little Kay and the brave Gerda.

Already the trousseau that the Princess had embroidered with such tender care was

packed in the trunks. They had spread over an arm-chair the wedding-veil which had belonged to the Queen Désirée, the little Frenchwoman, with the nickname that described her charm, who had reigned over Sweden.

‘Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!’

For the last time the guard was marching by, leaving the Princess with undying memories of the intrepid little Tin Soldier; General Goat’s-Head; the China Shepherdess; all those beings who give to all the children in the world a common country: the ‘Land of Dreams.’

Since, however, the Princess was going to be married she would have some little children of her own who would want to hear the stories and who, in their turn, would set sail for ‘The Land of Heart’s Desire.’

In the imposing hall of the Rykstat where the representatives of the Swedish provinces of the legends were gathered together, Prince Leopold and Princess Astrid were united before the Law. For the last time the good people of Stockholm had surrounded the carriage cheering frantically. For the last time Astrid had waved her white-gloved hand, and for the last time her smile had illumined the ‘Floating City.’ The guard had presented arms to the carriage disappearing beneath the arch of the Royal Palace.

Then the King of Sweden, as he proposed

the health of the young royalties during the marriage feast, had summed up all that Sweden felt in this day of jollity and farewells. As well as a benediction it was a sad farewell that he offered his favourite niece : ' My dear Astrid, consecrate yourself entirely to the great and beautiful task which awaits you. So will your life be happy, but give a thought sometimes to the land of your birth and to the home where your childhood was spent.'

Astrid, crying, gave her uncle a big kiss and all her love for Sweden was in it and in her tears.

CHAPTER IX

AS LOVELY AS A FAIRYTALE

THE seagulls of the Baltic made a white escort for the 'Princess of the Snows': while they were on the wing, the ship which was bringing her to her new country drew alongside the quay an innumerable crowd of people massed on the shore and behind them could be seen the silhouette of Antwerp Cathedral.

The naval batteries were already announcing her arrival to which the canon of the fortified town had replied.

As Astrid breathed in the smell of the sea that the River Escant carries along, this journey seemed to her more beautiful than any she had dreamed. 'A Prince Charming' awaited her and in two days they would be united before God.

The impatient crowd could see the name inscribed on the prow of the ship *FYLGIA* and, at the mast-head, the Swedish flag of blue and gold. Then the Belgian people could see the Princess that one of her Princes loved. She came to him like a delicious

vision : beautiful and gracious, ready-to-give-her-heart.

She gave it at once ; with a pretty gesture of her hand ; with a frank greeting ; with a smile. On the gangway joining the Swedish vessel to Belgian soil the Princess Astrid gave Prince Leopold a kiss wherein lay all her new love and tenderness.

By the graciousness of that kiss ' Astrid of Sweden ' became ' Astrid of Belgium.'

The great bell of Sainte Gudule at Brussels, which is centuries old, never remembered ringing such a deafening carillon, and the marriage bell had to work hard in order that the nuptial song it had composed should not be drowned by the clamour.

The bells of every church in the town, too, threw themselves into the game : ' Ding ! Dong ! Ding ! Dong ! ' What a concert it was. . . .

It was just eight years since their voices had recovered sufficiently to sing the victory. But many of them, melted down by the enemy or carried into exile, failed to answer the call.

' Ding ! Ding ! Dong ! Ding ! Ding ! Dong ! '

To-day all the bronze voices of the happy country united to chime the marriage of the Prince and Princess.

It was the loveliest day !

The houses were decorated with velvet

hangings on the balconies. The streets were like a long forest of flags—a forest that wore all the colours of the ponds and trees in autumn: blue and yellow, red and black.

The little children had got up very early, for they wanted to put on their best dresses. They were hurrying to see if a Prince's marriage was really as splendid as it said in the story-books.

Four little children, dressed as pages, bore the bride's train: a train five yards long, like a stream of flashing water.

The bride went up the immense staircase of Sainte Gudule on the arm of her father, the 'Blue Prince,' and the four little pages were so overcome by his blue and golden uniform that they nearly stumbled at each step.

When the Princess knelt down before the altar they spread the white train on the crimson carpet and bowed, with their hands on their hearts. The music of the great organs was like the sound of many waters and the old cathedral seemed to have changed into an immense ship which carried toward the Kingdom of God—in joy and peace—the Kings and Queens of the earth; the Princes and Princesses; the Dukes and all poor men. A hundred children's voices, pure and exquisite, were lifted to implore the blessing of heaven on the most beautiful of voyages. A dome of cramoisie velvet overhung the nave

and fell in ermine streamers: it was a magnificent spectacle.

The Archbishop, with crosier and mitre, robed in a cope woven of fine gold three hundred years old, pronounced the holy words which fell on the hearts of the Prince and Princess like a blessing: 'From now on, you will accomplish your earthly journey together having your thoughts and feelings in common; your joys and sorrows; all your interests and all your hopes.'

And their angels in heaven replied: 'Amen! Amen!'

Then the Archbishop, putting the gold rings upon the fingers of the Prince and the Princess, united them: 'In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.'

Again, this time with their wings intertwined, the angels of the new bride and bridegroom replied: 'Amen! Amen!'

And the pure heart of the Princess was more pleasing than any other to Him who loves little children and who has promised His Paradise to those who resemble them by their candid simplicity.

On the walls of the Choir they had hung the old tapestries that commemorate, in faded colours, the story of the 'Blessed Sacrament of the Miracle.' This choice of subject was at the same time a sign, for, all her life, Astrid had believed quite naturally in the power of God and in miracles.

So it was that the 'God of Miracles and of Hope' had arranged her life like a lovely story and had given to her smile a miraculous power.

* * *

When the children went to bed they all agreed that the story-book had not lied. The marriage of a Prince and Princess was exactly like they had read or dreamed.

They had seen a bride as beautiful as the day and as radiant as the dawn. They had seen the 'Prince Charming,' superb in his uniform, across which the wide ribbon lay scintillating with the decorations of war. They had seen them both passing, flushed with joy, beneath the arch of steel that was the crossed sabres of the comrades-in-arms of the Prince.

They had seen many real Kings as well and more honoured than all the others, that great Hero of the Belgian Epic—'Albert the First.'

There were Royal Highnesses and Grand Duchesses and Princes with names that recalled the legends of far-away countries and the geography of dreams: Axel of Denmark; René de Bourbon; Sigvard; Sixte de Bourbon Parme . . .

They had seen Bishops with their mitres and violet-robed prelates; canons in mantles and ministers and dignitaries in all their



‘When the Princess came out on the balcony of the palace.’

glory ; golden coaches drawn by horses in brilliant harness decorated with scarlet ribbons prancing along amidst the glitter of drawn bayonets and, in a long ribbon that glistened and waved, all the standards of the Great War.

Perhaps the most unforgettable sight of all, however, was when the Princess came out on the balcony of the palace. She had waved to them with such a gracious gesture, a gesture at once enthusiastic and frank, accompanied by the most marvellous of smiles.

No one could have proved to them that it was not more lovely than the loveliest story, and, in order to listen, there was no need to shut their eyes and implore the Sand Man to come : a story such as children are only allowed to live through (with eyes wide open) but once in a thousand years. That night it was the children who found it difficult to tell the Sand Man all that they had seen.

* * *

As they took off the wedding dress of the Princess they saw that it was covered with little pearls which were really tears : she had just said ' Good-bye ! ' to her father and mother and to all the blue and all the sunshine of her childhood.

Yet she was happier than ever. There had

been one hour, amidst all the other hours of this wedding-day, which had been particularly sweet: it was on the balcony of the palace when she had leaned over to smile at the people. In the blue sky, strewn with little white clouds that made her think of swans on a lake, slowly—in triangular formation—aeroplanes were passing. The Princess looked up, for well she knew that the wild geese, with old Akka de Kebnekaise at their head, would come again to complete her happiness. It was the time when the birds fly south. Never would the little Swedish Princess forget her country for, like Sweden, she had been a *butterfly that longs for its wings* and she did not doubt but on that happy day she had found them.

She was going away on the arm of her Prince!

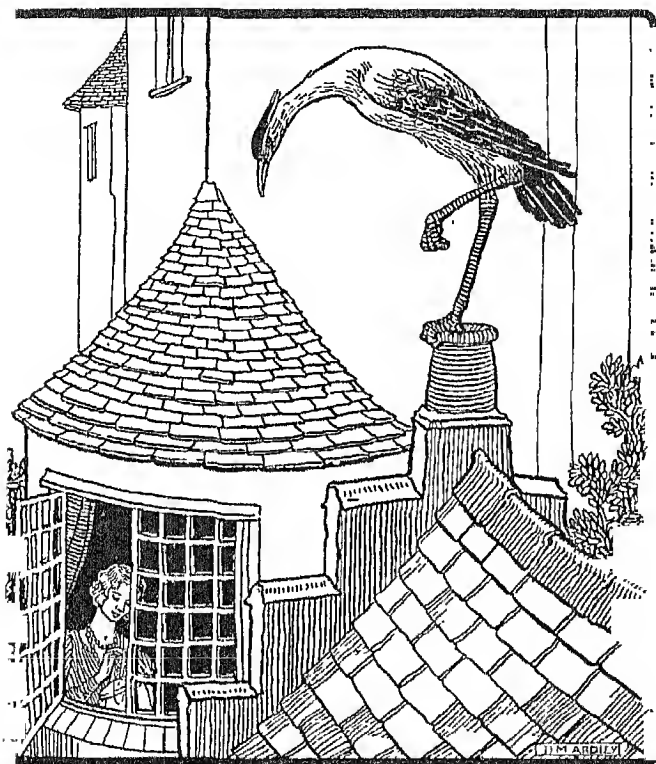
CHAPTER X

THE COMING OF THE STORK

THE Princess was waiting to see Mr. Ermenrich the Stork go by. As everybody knows the visit of the stork means that a Guardian Angel leaves heaven to come and put a tiny babe against the heart of a mother.

As a matter of fact, the last winter had brought serious worries to the 'Princess of the Snows.' It had been a grey winter, very different from the white winters of Sweden. Hardly had the snow fallen than the motors and trams of Brussels made the thin carpet into dirty, dreary mud. The trees did not take advantage of the frost to make themselves a cloak out of it, but remained bare and desolate. In the big rooms with the high windows of the Palais Belle-Vue, Astrid might well arrange her flowers and smile from morning till night: she could not give the Palace the warmth of a house.

So she feared that Mr. Ermenrich would be frightened and would turn away from the happy little Princess who wanted a great many children.



'The coming of the Stork.'

But King Albert, who loved his ' dear little one ' (as he called the sweet daughter who had come from the North) had arranged everything very well. He had given the Prince and Princess a little castle, the castle of Stuyvenberg, which was like a nest hidden in the branches.

Already the peonies had flowered and the rose-buds were opening in the flower borders. Beneath the window an obstinate cricket sang his song of joy every evening. The Princess knew that Mr. Ermenrich would guess quite easily that a hearth which awaited his coming was there, under the leaves.

Perhaps in the autumn ?

As it was she only just consented to leave the cosy nest of Stuyvenberg for a few days to be present in Rome at the marriage of Princess Marie-José with the Crown Prince of Italy.

Neither the gorgeous ceremonies nor the splendours of the ' Eternal City ' could distract Astrid from the thought of her future little child. She remained wrapped up in her dreams of motherhood, as in a gentle prayer, and forgot everything else in the world.

When she returned to her peaceful home the days were golden, and many-coloured stars had been scattered about the garden by the asters and dahlias. The vine was blood-red and the trees took on glowing tints, and

as for the park it was nothing less than a great flame.

In the little room where they had shut themselves up with their joy the Prince arranged his marvellous collection of insects while the Princess embroidered tiny vests and bibs.

It was colder now, so every night they lit a fire of wood and fir-cones. Mr. Ermenrich could come now for the chimney was warm and he would understand the sign.

* * *

On the eleventh of October a little girl was born. They called her Josephine, like the Empress in the miniature. They gave her a second name, too, Charlotte, the name of an Empress (Belgian by birth) who had also been courageous and good.

Josephine-Charlotte had fair hair and blue eyes like her father. But she had her mother's smile.

CHAPTER XI

A GREAT CARDINAL

JUST as she had liked to hear the fine, Swedish stories of long ago, so the Princess was interested now in the history of her new country.

No one knew better than she how great and noble King Albert was. He was her Hero and she loved and admired him with all her soul.

She often begged Prince Leopold to tell her the 'Saga of the Belgians' over again so that she might the better feel the affection for the land where her husband and first child were born.

So he told it and when he spoke of the life of the Tommies in the trenches; of the courage of the defenders of the Yser; of the brotherhood of all those who had fought together the heart of the Princess overflowed with sadness and pride.

As she constantly thought of those who had no one to look after them, she asked about that part of Belgium which was occupied by the enemy.

Then the Prince, with great emotion in his voice, evoked the face of the great Cardinal who, in the absence of the King, had cared for the oppressed provinces and had defied the oppressor.

He, too, was a Hero : a Hero and very saintly. It was he who had shown the Duke of Brabant, still a child, the way of goodness : had taught him how he might discover every day a little more beauty in that garden of beauty which is Religion.

The Duke described the gentleness, the simplicity, the heroism of this Prince of the Church whom the whole country had mourned.

It is the instinct of great souls to love flowers and to discover their especial scent. Like the Princess of Frithem, the great Cardinal adored roses. One day when some little girls came from Wallonie to see him, he went himself to pick ' Gloire-de-Dijon ' and tea-roses in the garden of the Archbishop's palace.

A few days before the death of this great Prelate Queen Elizabeth had been to his bedside to take him some flowers from the royal greenhouses. Touched by her kindness he had thanked her for having bothered to bring flowers to a dying old man.

' But, your Eminence, you cannot die,' had replied one who knew how to comfort the suffering. ' What would become of Belgium without her great Cardinal ? '

And the old man had murmured in his gentle voice, like a supreme blessing :

‘ What does it matter, Madam, if there remains in Belgium the smile of a Queen ? ’

* * *

After hearing these lovely stories the young Princess wished one day to go and pray in in the chapel where the Cardinal had so often meditated alone.

It was on the day after the Feast of ‘ Our Lady of the Snows.’

Astrid the ‘ Princess-ready-to-give-her-heart ’ was happier than ever to have become a Belgian Princess by the complete gift of her soul.

When she had set foot on the soil of her new country she had been able to say to the Prince the words of Ruth in the Bible—which is the most beautiful story in the world because its truth is above all other truths :

‘ Thy people shall be my people.’

When she came out of the chapel of the great Cardinal who was beloved of the Prince she, too, could say :

‘ And thy God shall be my God.’

CHAPTER XII

IN THE LAND OF THE SUN

THE wild geese that fly in triangles in the autumn skies had returned to the land of Nils Holgersson full of strange stories to tell the seagulls of the Baltic. They related how a Swedish Princess was pushing the pram of her first baby in the park of a castle in Brabant.

Thereupon, three young gulls, with adventure in their wings and the longing to see other shores, decided to fly away to the Southern seas. They would fly so far that, like the wild geese, they, too, would surely come upon the Princess of their country, the 'Princess of Stockholm,' who beckoned to them.

Thus they departed on their long voyage whirled about by the winds of December. After the pearly stretches of the Baltic came the grey waves of the North Sea. When they were tired of fighting against the squalls they settled gently into the troughs of the waves: their blue feet and pink beaks bathed by the sea.

However, when they came to the mouth of the Escant, the great river, the three seagulls from the Baltic were overcome by a great tiredness and were discouraged by the feeling that they would never get to the place where lived the Princess of their country. A ship was sailing forward, majestically, towards the open sea. She parted the grey waters with her powerful keel and a plume of grey smoke trailed behind her across the winter sky. The three seagulls, very tired, alighted on the tall mast.

Now this ship at the mouth of the Escant was the ship which was carrying the Prince and Princess, who were also called the Duke and Duchess of Brabant, toward the Dutch East Indies. The young royalties were making a voyage of many months to the other side of the earth, to the land of variegated butterflies and of flowers with the scent of spices.

Princess Astrid had long dreamed about this lovely voyage on a splendid ship. She remembered the 'Blue Prince's' marvellous stories. Now her turn had come to see other stars rise out of the seas in another sky. She stood at the prow of the vessel for she wished to be the first to greet the Southern Cross in the southern hemisphere, because the Southern Cross, scintillating on the velvet of tropical nights, is like the blue and gold colours of Sweden.

The passengers on the lovely ship could not

doubt that they were in the company of royalty: life on board was peaceful and orderly. The officers organised games on the bridge, and Astrid, who was very quick, often won at quoits. Smiling, with a smile that was already familiar to her companions, when a first prize came to crown her success.

One evening the Captain had invited the passengers to a fancy-dress ball. There was to be a competition for the best costume. The Duchess of Brabant had been asked to preside over the jury. The prizes were dolls, ravishing marquises with billowing skirts of silk, powdered hair, with rouge on their cheeks and vermilion on their lips.

The Duchess discharged her office as the President of the Jury with much pleasure for she remembered the dolls of her childhood. Her smile made that of the marquise dolls pale into insignificance. They gave her a large doll, too, and while she took it off to her cabin Josephine-Charlotte's mother thought how delighted her little girl would be to see, on her return, the powdered curls of the marquise doll.

* * *

The Baltic seagulls, perched on the tall mast of the ship, had been present at the competition for the prettiest fancy dress. Without doubt, they said to each other, the

loveliest passenger was surely the Princess of their country, the 'Princess of Stockholm' who attracted so much admiration on board.

From the grey rollers of the North Sea the ship had passed into the choppier waves of the Channel. Then she was rocked in the swell of the ocean until, through the Straits of Gibraltar, she slipped into the vast, blue lake that is the Mediterranean. The seagulls knew Lake Malar well, but this immense, blue lake frightened them a little, besides, they were hot. When they got into the Red Sea, oh, how they missed the good wettings they had had in the icy waters of the fjords!

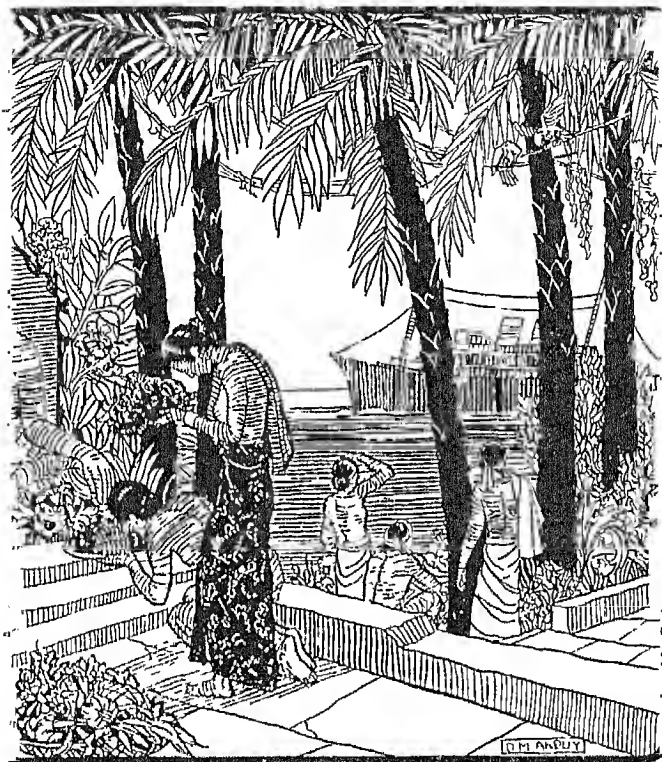
Suddenly the Southern Cross rose in the sky. They had come to the Malay Archipelago.

* * *

The Duke of Brabant, Prince Leopold, loved insects and plants. He landed in the Archipelago with his botanist's box and nets ready to capture the blue butterflies.

In this tropical country where the volcanoes are crowned with copper-coloured vapour the tresses of the palm trees tremble in the Trade-winds, and the Princess of Fridhem (remembering the summer garden of her childhood) rejoiced above all in the scent of the unknown flowers.

Soon she had no greater pleasure than visiting the Botanical Gardens of Java, where



The Temple of Bourouboudour.

the most beautiful varieties of palms are collected and their fronds from bowers all along the roped-in alleyways.

When she went through villages where the Javanese walked about beneath their parasol hats, Astrid was interested, first of all, in the flowers growing in the gardens near the rice-fields. While the Prince made people explain to him how sugar-cane was cultivated; the extraction of gutta-percha; the methods of fermentation of the white tobacco plant and of the tea which perfumes the porcelain pots, the Princess had the natives questioned about the names of the flowers that they put in homage before their gods.

When she came to the temple of Bourouboudour she wanted to know why the sculptor had represented the mango tree in the stone, for she had noticed the Javanese coming to market in the cool of the early morning, carrying on their shoulders the flexible bamboo rods supporting baskets of mangoes, bananas and juicy pine-apples.

Then there was the mystery of the virgin forest. It spread its branches and its lianas over the greater part of the Malay Archipelago. Instead of the pines and birches of the Swedish forest were tree ferns that seemed to climb into the sky; lianas like curtains; monstrous rhododendrons and those shrubs that a wet moss covers like a muff. The monkeys were playing tricks on each other and the

parrots said a thousand rude things. But the seagulls remained at rest on the tall mast and did not hear their cheeky remarks.

* * *

You may still hear the story to-day in Java, the Fortunate Isle, how the 'Princess of the Snows,' on the night she returned from Bali, where she had watched the sacred dances of the little priestesses with golden finger-nails, had wished to wander in the alleyways of the Botanical Gardens that the Dutch have named 'Buitenzorg,' which means 'Without care.'

In the sweetness of the evening, among the sleeping flowers and the palm trees that waved more drowsily, a mother wondered about her little girl. What was Josephine-Charlotte doing, far away, on the other side of the world? As the hours are not the same in Stuyvenberg and the Buitenzorg, the mother could imagine that her eighteen-months'-old baby was playing with her doll. She would be so pleased when she hugged the large marquise doll in her arms.

In the perfumed garden 'Without Care,' on the other side of the world, the Duchess sighed.

Then the three seagulls of the Baltic felt that maternal sigh pass them in the evening air, and, like the brave birds they were, who

came from the country of the wild geese that Nils Holgersson led across Sweden, they did not wait any more, but launched themselves into the air. They had been given a very tender message. More swiftly than the geese who fly in triangles they came to say to the house at Stuyvenberg—before they regained Lake Malar and the beckoning city of Stockholm—that the siren of the beautiful ship in the Malay port would soon sound for the return journey.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE LITTLE PRINCE OF THE CENTENARY

ONE heard nothing else, from one end of the country to the other, but the notes of the 'Brabançonne.'

Every Sunday, in church, the organs swelled in a clamour of triumph. In its honour, the choirs, which generally divide the villages into two enemy clans, had reconciled themselves: in the towns, the smallest restaurants engaged an accordion-player and the beer-drinkers raised their glasses to shout in chorus: 'The King! The Law! Liberty!' In the streets, little boys tried out the tune on mouth-organs or on a sixpenny tin-whistle: in the houses the little girls picked out the notes on the piano with one finger.

This national hymn that everyone played or sang or wanted to hear was really a very old air. It dated from the time when Belgium had thrown off the sovereignty of foreigners and had regained her rights, her liberty and her name.

As this was the Centenary of her freedom

the Belgians rejoiced and raised their hats in respect each time that the first bars of the song of their independence burst forth again.

To celebrate such an anniversary fêtes were organised everywhere. Schoolboys learned the history of their country with a new fervour and it is, from first to last, a magnificent epic. They felt proud to have ancestors who had never resigned themselves to the yoke of an unjust rule or, at the price of their lives, had never wished to lie, but had bought the liberty of their land instead, by their faith, their courage and their invincible perseverance. The schoolchildren lingered over the pages where the first Queen of the Belgians was described, she who was so good and so attractive that they called her 'Louise the Well-beloved.'

A hundred years !

It was enough that Belgium should feel herself at liberty to affirm that she was a nation capable of great things. In one century she had become lovely and prosperous. She had come through her trials stronger because she was more united. The Belgians liked to go arm-in-arm, and it is because of this that the country was thick with societies who marched out on the occasion of the Centenary with their banners and music.

The Belgians had always classed work above everything else, for they knew that it

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was by work that a people remains free. The Kings and Princes had set the example. Leopold I and II were great and untiring workers. Albert I rose at dawn to work and Prince Leopold would hardly take any rest, so eager was he to study as much science as possible in order to learn his future profession of King.

Astrid, who was also very active, often opened the door of the study where the Prince, for long hours leant over his books. He lifted his head and suddenly his work became easier : the Princess was there, with her smile that lightened everything.

* * *

Years ago the Princess had asked herself : ' Could there exist anywhere else another nation as lively, as capable and as nimble as the Swedes ? ' Now she said to herself : ' Nowhere else in the world is there a people so thrilled with its liberty or so hard-working as the Belgian ! ' And she longed with all her heart to have a son who was of this proud race and of this thrifty nation which she both cherished and admired.

The festivities of the Centenary followed each other. Often the Princes were present, and each time Astrid waved her hand the crowd saw the pretty gesture with renewed pleasure.

The echo of the fêtes and the fireworks came to Stuyvenberg. In the garden there were joyous bursts of laughter. Princess Josephine-Charlotte ran about the paths in Hindu pyjamas under a Japanese umbrella, and she seemed very tiny by the side of the King, her grandfather, who was smiling at her.

‘The dwarf and the giant,’ thought the mother.

The dwarf in question was a mischievous and restless little girl who liked nothing better than to disappear when no one was looking. She loved to be in her grandfather’s arms. From there, through the leaves, she could see into the rose-garden. Who knew but what an angel guardian had not already found the particular rose, among all the many-coloured roses, in which to put the little brother she wanted so much?

* * *

The roses were still at their best in every garden, when, one morning, the cannon began to fire.

One hundred and one shots exactly!

The people said it had been arranged to coincide with the rejoicings and that it was the signal for the best of them. The present of the year of the Centenary had come in the shape of a little Prince.

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He received the name of Baudouin, which had been the name of six Counts of Flanders ; six Counts of Hainault ; five Kings of Jerusalem ; of more than one crusading knight and of two Emperors.

A formidable name which he received without a murmur.

When he was baptised he received, without a tear, the salt of wisdom on his tongue and the oil of strength on his forehead ; from which everyone concluded that he would be a true Baudouin, wise and strong.

The rejoicings were redoubled. The Brabançonne rolled out like a great wave across the country. A triumphal gust of wind unfurled the Standards with a flourish.

' All the hopes of the Dynasty are fulfilled,' said the old people.

The children looked at them, not quite understanding what they meant. They only rejoiced because a little Prince had been given them as a present for Jubilee Year. In the story-books didn't Princes always come into the world to the sound of fanfares and fireworks ?

And the street urchins jumped for joy along the pavements and began the national hymn all over again on their mouth-organs. The little girls felt another kind of joy. In their hearts, that were made to love and already inclined towards babies, they better understood the joy of the mother leaning

over the cradle and the pleasure of Josephine-Charlotte who, from now on, would have a little brother to kiss every night and morning.

So it was that Princess Astrid received letters like these :

10th September, 1930.

To the Duke and Duchess of Brabant.

I am very pleased to hear of the birth of a little Prince. I hope you will always have good nights. I hope that the little boy will have an amusing time with his little sister. All the country is pleased, as now we are sure to have a King when his father dies.

I hope he will be a lovely child when he is bigger. Now I would like to know if he is well : as I haven't seen him yet.

I hope you will be very lucky.

(Signed) SIMONE DEWEZ.

MADAM THE DUCHESS OF BRABANT,

I send you this little letter to congratulate you on the birth of little Prince Baudouin. I hope he is well. I wish that he may be a good little Prince. Little Princess Charlotte has a little brother now. I hope she likes him and plays nicely with him.

I know that your son was born on Sunday September 7th. He is therefore a little Centenarian because he is born in the year

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of the Centenary. I hope he will be as wise and as good a Prince as his Papa.

I send you all my good wishes, and to the little Prince also.

(Signed) LUCIENNE DEMETTER.

THE DUKE OF BRABANT.

THE DUCHESS OF BRABANT.

On Sunday, when I heard the news, I danced for joy. Little Princess Josephine-Charlotte must be very pleased to have a brother who will play with her later on. When he is bigger and becomes a King he must be very good and wise like his grandfather 'Albert the First.'

I finish my letter by sending you big kisses.

(Signed) RENÉE ROMBAUT.

MADAME,

Our schoolmistress has told us that you have bought a lovely little boy. I wish I could come and play with him. I hope that King Albert is also very pleased to be grandpapa again.

My congratulations.

(Signed) VIOLETTE MATON.

Even a little Fleming who did not know French very well wrote a prettily confused

letter that Princess Astrid understood all the same.

The mother of Prince Baudouin received, with tears of joy, all these good wishes that came from so many sincere and spontaneous little hearts. She thought that they were worth all the wishes of the Fairies who, long ago, surrounded the cradles of King's sons.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EVIDENCE OF BAMBI

IT was a long time since the seagulls of the Baltic had returned to the shores of Lake Mala. Josephine-Charlotte's Hindu pyjamas had had time to become too short.

Since he had learned to walk little Prince Baudouin showed a marked leaning, that was ever more apparent, for acrobatics, climbing and danger. Sometimes his mother surprised him pulling out the fireguard to see the sparks fly out on the carpet : sometimes she found him on top of the cupboard.

Josephine-Charlotte knew how to observe things and to remember, by heart, the little affectionate names her father and mother gave each other. They were very pretty names, and she said them over to herself when there was nobody to tell her stories : for she loved stories, just as Princess Astrid had loved them.

As soon as the well-known motor-horn was heard in the drive Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin rushed to their mother, crying :

'Here's Papa!' and all three hurried down the steps.

Papa put one of his children on his shoulders, took the other under his arm and kissed their mother. Then began jolly games.

They could truthfully have hung out a notice outside the gate of Stuyvenberg Castle: 'House of Happiness.'

The more Princess Astrid loved her own children, however, the more she thought of all the children who were not loved and looked after like her own. When people spoke to her about those hundreds of negro babies who died in the Congo because their parents did not know the rules of health or the way to make babies' food, her mother's heart was touched. So she decided to accompany Prince Leopold when he wished to visit the 'Kingdom of the Blacks' which his great-uncle had given to the Belgian people and which his father—whom the Blacks called the 'Great King'—had traversed three times.

* * *

This is the story, then, that Bambi (the little negro in the shadow of the Plantation Chapel) still tells to-day.

Bambi was seven years old when he had the joy of seeing the son of the 'Great King' and the 'White Princess.' He was only one negro among millions of others. After school,



'Wiping the plates on his wooly hair.'

where the good Sisters taught him the catechism and hymns, he was employed doing housework for the planters. He knew how to wash dishes and could polish shoes so well that they reflected the smile of his white teeth like a mirror. With respect to the dishes, the cook said she had once surprised Bambi in the act of wiping the plates on his woolly hair. Perhaps it was true, but he twizzled the plates round so fast and he had such fuzzy hair that it was, mayhap, the best way to make the china shine.

‘I saw them,’ says Bambi (the little negro who blacks the shoes and polishes the china on his wool). ‘Sister Superior had given us paper roses to make paper wreaths and there was a pure white cloth on the altar of the Chapel and a red carpet on the floor. We sang the song of the white men in the choir, a very nice song which made a lot of noise.

‘The morning of the great day we got up before dawn. We had put on our white trousers and we waved red, yellow and black flags. We knew when we finished singing the white men’s song we had to lift our flags towards the sky.

‘The son of the “Great King” and the Princess arrived in a motor-car. There was a crowd on the road and we all sang and waved our flags together.

' Then the Princess came towards us : she was smiling. As I was in the front row, with my white trousers on and my flag waving, she said to me : " What is your name ? " in our own language. She was smiling so sweetly that I wasn't frightened a bit.

' When I told her it was " Bambi " she leaned down to kiss me and gave me this medal.'

Every time he tells this story to the little negroes of the Plantation Chapel Bambi dive into his trousers pocket for the medal in order to show it to his companions. It's no longer very clean, for little, scarred, dirty, sticky fingers have made a rough edge to it, so that it isn't very attractive. But it really is the medal the Princess gave him, and Bambi looks after it as if it were gold.

' Then,' he goes on to say, ' she put her hand on my head.'

That woolly wig that was so useful to the young would-be cook for cleaning greasy plates : that hair as curly as a black lamb's which Astrid had caressed with her gentle hand.

Thus it was that on the African soil of the ' Kingdom of the Blacks ' the mother of Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin made friends with the little negroes.

The very tiny babies whom the ' White

Princess' had cuddled and kissed the most were too young then to remember it: but in their dreams they see a pair of loving eyes and a smile!

CHAPTER XV

THE MARQUESS OF CARABAS

THE Marquess of Carabas went to call one day on Princess Astrid. 'Puss-in-boots,' had more than one trick up his sleeve, for on her birthday, among other presents, Josephine-Charlotte had been given a ticket for 'a matinée of the marionettes.'

Some weeks after, the celebrated Mr. Peruchet—who was well known to all the children of the capital—came and put up his theatre in the dining-room of the Castle of Stuyvenberg. Delighted and impatient Josephine-Charlotte went round and round the table where tea was laid out; the cake was there, with five candles surrounded by little fir trees; for it would soon be Christmas.

The red and gold theatre up against the window was superb—what could be behind it? She went to see. It was so funny to see the gentleman with his strings and puppets. The little Princess asked his name and where he lived.

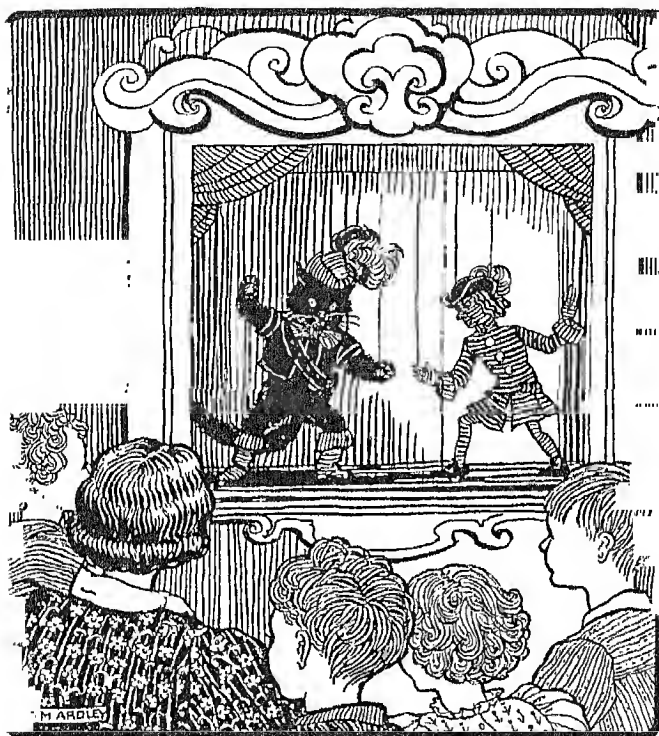
Baudouin, who was quite a big boy, was

waiting too, very excited, for all the marvelous things they had been promised. In order to do justice to them he had eaten his potatoes at lunch very quickly but very nicely. He had been so good, in fact, that he had not been told, as he usually was, that he could not go for a drive in the car with his friend the Little Chauffeur. He very much wanted to bring Tomasine, the doll he took to bed every night, to see the play. But everyone said that Tomasine was too dirty and battered about : not at all presentable, in fact. Besides, just suppose she were frightened at ' Puss-in-boots.'

Just then the curtain went up and the famous cat, with his red boots and his bag with the shoulder-belt, came on to the stage. He had a very magnificent moustache and he talked and talked. His master became so confused by all his talk that he finished up by doing what the cat told him to do, namely, to take off his poor man's clothes so that everyone would think he was the Marquess of Carabas.

My word, the clothes came off pretty quickly—the coat and then the trousers and even the shirt ! The young audience stamped on the floor for joy.

At last the cat cried so much that the King came along in his coach with his daughter. The wily Tom-cat, bowing low before him, said : ' Your Majesty is very kind



'Just then the curtain went up.'

to descend from your coach. The wicked robbers have stolen all his clothes from my master the Marquess of Carabas.'

The King replied, most *majestically* :

' Let some one go to my wardrobe and bring my smartest suit to dress the Marquess of Carabas in ! '

Oh, but it was too funny, the King sending for silk trousers and a feathered cap from his wardrobe ! A hearty laugh, fresh and clear, suddenly burst out—Princess Astrid was enjoying herself immensely.

But the other Princess in the story came on to the stage to see what was happening. She had been very frightened. ' My little heart is going pit-a-pat,' she said. And, in the wings came the echo : ' Pit-a-pat.'

The funniest of all though was the mouse. She ran this way and that and Puss-in-boots, who thought himself so clever, couldn't catch it.

' But it's there ! It's there, look ! ' cried Josephine-Charlotte, Baudouin and their little friends.

Then the cat crunched it, but it was hard and bony because it was so old. The glutton declared that a young Miss Mouse would have suited him better.

At last, the Marquess of Carabas and the Princess rode along in the coach, and they liked each other so much they decided to get married. The Princess' heart went ' pit-a-pat '

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again. Being a story, however, it had to end with them both 'living happily ever after'!

* * *

The curtain rose again, to the sound of music, to discover some clowns: Triple-Mêche was sitting at the piano accompanying the saxophone player, who asked the audience to give him the note. How delightful these marionettes were, talking so kindly to their youthful patrons! There was Carapatte, too, in his cask, and other puppets who danced in a very comical fashion!

But it was Triple-Mêche who amused Josephine-Charlotte the most. She wanted him to stay on the stage all the time, seated at his piano. But when he asked the children to blow so that he could float away into the air the little Princess rushed forward to prevent him. She caught hold of the curtain, pulled it down across the balustrade and . . . the light fused. All the lamps, of course, went out, and, in the darkness, everyone heard her mother saying: 'Charlotte, you're a very naughty girl and you'll go to bed if . . .'

But the little girl had crept to her mother and probably she had promised all manner of things for, when the lights came on, only the happy faces of the children and the smile of Princess Astrid were to be seen.

Finally Princess Astrid, with her melodious

accent, said to Mr. Peruchet when she thanked him : ' We have all of us had a lovely time ! ' So did the Marquess of Carabas enchant Princess Astrid's young and candid heart, and it had all been as fresh, lovely and amusing as it was in the other story.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SALUTE OF THE SABRE

THE Princess who had dreamed long ago of the 'Saga of the Belgians' never felt her heart beat so fast as when she saw the soldiers march past on the days of the big reviews. 'Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!' Then all the brass bands and the trumpets! Forward! March! On either side of their mother Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin danced for joy.

They went along roads crammed with people. They tried to find a place on the edge of the pavement where they could see better. There were other children by the side of the little Princess and Prince, and, like them, they were impatient.

'They're coming, they're coming, I tell you!'

The drum-major marched at the head. He made a half-turn, threw his stick with the golden knob into the air and caught it with a knowing little flourish. This trick filled Baudouin with admiration.

'Mother, what are those little tassels on the pointed hat?'

The squadrons advanced, on foot, behind the band. To tell the truth Josephine-Charlotte didn't like the khaki uniforms much, she thought them very dull compared with the military cloak of her grandfather, the 'Blue Prince.' As she was beginning to read, she tried to spell out the names embroidered in gold on the Colours: 'MERCKEM, HAELEN, DIXMUDE.' All those names were very complicated, but, apparently, they stood for big things.

Baudouin was terribly thrilled as the cannon went by in a noise of thunder. The tanks seemed to eat the pavement as they crawled along. One couldn't see their wheels: it was very odd! There and then, all the boys decided that they would ask Santa Claus for a little tank so that they could take it to pieces and see how it worked.

The soldiers were still marching by.

Still they came and still they came. . . .

They were brave little soldiers—one could see that, as they waited to march past the man whom they called the 'Soldier-King.' When that moment came, they all lifted their heads so proudly as though to say: 'You know, we mean to be the worthy sons of those who fought at your side along the Yser.'

The officers wore their decorations and the thought of soon being in front of the King gave them a yet more warlike air.

'Look! There's Papa!'

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The face of the Princess lit up for joy as her hands pressed more strongly on the shoulders of her two children.

Then—more music—and at the head of his regiment, The Prince.

‘ Papa ! ’

‘ Long live the Prince ! ’ cried the crowd.

Leopold, the chin-strap of his steel-helmet beneath his chin, wore a proud look—that of a true King’s son.

‘ You see,’ said an urchin of the Rue Haute, ‘ one can be an officer very young.’

‘ It’s Papa ! ’

The band was playing the march of ‘ The Sambre and Meuse.’

When he came opposite his little boy, Prince Leopold reined in his horse and gravely saluted Baudouin, Count of Hainault, with his sabre.

Then that urchin of the Rue Haute, who had suddenly understood many things, yelled with all his might: ‘ Long live Princess Astrid ! ’

Again she smiled.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BLACK PALL

JOSEPHINE-CHARLOTTE could no longer put on her coloured dresses, she didn't exactly know why. All about her were strange happenings. People talked in whispers and all the lights were not lit. The church bells tolled sadly, sadly.

Why was she left so long alone? . . . And Papa? . . . And Mother? . . . And Grandfather? . . . And Grandmother? . . . Josephine thought that if everyone she loved were around her she would feel less cold. Baudouin wanted to play: but how could one play!

If only someone would come and sit in front of this sort of black sheet who would explain things to her and comfort her until they lit the little lamp. But the cloth remained quite black and a word danced, from time to time, in front of her eyes: DEAD!

What did that mean: DEAD?

She remembered seeing a bird on the path

one day with his wings folded back—but who had folded them?

Mother cried all the more and only said that grandfather had gone on a long journey.

What journey?

Still Baudouin was happy because his Uncle Umberto, the husband of Aunt Marie-José, the Princess with the curly hair, had arrived in Brussels. No one knew better than he how to invent noisy games. He had given him a tiny model Fiat motor, which was a pure marvel.

But even Uncle Umberto was sad and silent.

The black cloth seemed to become thicker and thicker.

* * *

In the towns and villages many children were passing through strange experiences. Everyone had come out of their houses: the women were weeping and the men wiped away a furtive tear with the back of their hand.

‘The King is dead! The King is dead!’ they kept on repeating.

And the children, who failed to understand the meaning of it all, felt, nevertheless, that something tremendous had happened.

The schoolchildren at their catechism class had heard the Priest say, in a broken voice: ‘The King is dead. Pray for him.’

The mothers had held their sons close to them and had said: 'The great King; the knightly King, the Soldier-King, Albert the Good, is dead.'

He had fallen from a high rock that spanned the river: his head was broken.

* * *

As for the children in the capital, they had seen a sight they would never forget. As night fell a procession crossed the streets in silence and darkness. On a gun-carriage lay a coffin covered with a flag, and at the four corners officers carrying flaming torches. It was the procession of the dead King, whom they were bringing back to his Palace.

In their hearts the children had felt something terribly great which suddenly crushed them—they were so small. Their temples drummed and their limbs trembled.

The next day many little boys and girls filed past the Giant. His head was bandaged as though he were wounded and there was nothing in the Great Hall where he lay so great as he, except the little ivory crucifix which lay on his breast; the symbol of victory. The Queen had placed white lilac on the bed of him who was her life, her guide and her hope and its scent was very sweet. The children recalled that they had heard people talk of the odour of sanctity.

On the morning of the third day they heard the cannon fire. The men were startled, thinking of the Great War, especially the old soldiers who were present. The King was surrounded by all his army : that of yesterday and that of to-day.

Behind him marched his sons. His eldest son : the King !

Then Kings and Princes of every race, of every nation. So many, in fact, it seemed the whole world was represented in the last procession of ' Albert the Great.'

For the last time the bugle had sounded across the fields : for the last time the ' Brabançonne ' had begun like a cheer and had died away like a sob. ' Our Lady of Laeken ' had opened her mantle and the crypt of the Kings of Belgium had shut.

At home again, the children turned the pages of their story-books feverishly. But they found nothing there like this.

* * *

Josephine-Charlotte could not sleep. She had seen too many people wearing black veils and had vainly begged for them to be taken off. Every minute she expected to hear the bicycle bell ring. Was that Grandpa ?

Her mother came to sit on her bed to quieten her and talked of that blue land of the story-books that the Good God gives to

little children so that they may understand the better what that dream Paradise is like where all those who die in childlike purity will go one day.

Once again she read to her little daughter what she herself had read when she was a little girl in the shadow of the 'Blue Prince'—the passage from Nils Holgersson which runs :

' But all those who had wings and those who had none aspired to rise above the clouds, to seek what was behind them, to abandon the heavy body which dragged them earthward and to fly away towards Heaven. . . . '

The sweet melodious voice of the mother, little by little, pulled away the black veil. There was a radiant light in the tired head of the little girl so that when her mother closed the book and smilingly leaned over the little bed Josephine-Charlotte was asleep !

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SMILING QUEEN

WITH an habitual gesture the mother of Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin took a brush and comb from a bag and tidied the hair of the two children. They had to be neat and tidy for in a few moments they would enter the great Hall of the Senate.

In a few moments there would be a new King and Queen.

If there had been some children there instead of all these personages in robes or uniforms they would probably have regretted that the Queen had not put on an ermine mantle and a golden crown. But Astrid in her long mourning veils was so majestic that everyone wanted to shout: 'Long live the Queen!' While Leopold looked so noble and splendid because of his great grief that they felt like adding: 'Long live the King!'

In the Great Hall of the Senate were gathered the Cardinal and all the Ministers,

solemn personages dressed in black, dignitaries dressed in their best garments and the highest Generals of the army.

In a silence that could be felt the son of King Albert began to speak—Astrid looked at him: ‘I GIVE MYSELF ENTIRELY TO BELGIUM. . . .’

With one voice the cry burst forth ‘Long live the King!’

‘THE QUEEN WILL HELP ME WITH ALL HER MIGHT.’

As for that self-same might of the ‘Queen-ready-to-give-her-heart,’ it showed itself at once in her smile; that smile which was the surest pledge of her willingness to help.

‘Long live the Queen! Long live the Queen!’

During all this, Baudouin, Count of Hainault, heir presumptive to the crown, had his attention fixed upon the Cardinal-Archbishop’s hat. He longed to finger the silk and the magnificent scarlet cord. Under cover of the cheering he dared to stretch out one finger. A truly superb hat. . . .

‘Long live the King! Long live the Queen! Long live the little Prince and Princess!’

Preceded by his Lancers, the King rode through the loyal town. The Queen rode along the boulevards in a coach with Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin, whilst the

resounding cheers carried them along as though on a great wave of affection. Everyone loved what King Albert had left behind him like a precious heritage.

The young King so proud and firm; the open faces of the two little children and the Queen's smile.

* * *

The dreams of evening were close, but that night was not fated to be like other nights, for echoing in the ears of the children were the sound of the bells and the stories the old people had told them, and this blend of joy and sadness alone sufficed to keep them wakeful.

'I saw the King, the new King,' said a little boy to his sister, in a small voice.

'Tell me all about it,' implored his sister from the next bed.

'Well,' whispered the little boy, 'there were flags hung from every window and men with crosses and medals and ribbons of all colours. They told me those were the old soldiers of the Yser who fought in the Great War with King Albert at their head. We took our places at the corner of a square, behind the barriers. There was a policeman . . .'

'A policeman,' murmured his sister in great delight.

' . . . On a big black horse. Magnificent ! He said in a deep voice : " Let the children come forward—you people, and don't push ! " So we got right in the front rank.'

' And what did you see ? '

' People, crowds of people. On the staircase ; on the pavements ; on ladders ; on the street lamps ; on the roofs. There were soldiers with rifles and naked bayonets.'

' And the policeman—your policeman ? '

' He backed his horse into the crowd and, from time to time, an officer marched up and down in the middle of the road. We waited over an hour ! '

' And then ? '

' At last a police officer came by on a motor-bike and we heard cheering. Then there were soldiers on horseback who sounded their trumpets like the angels in the picture. They all carried lances with little pennons at the tips that danced like flames. The bugles sounded and the King passed by, followed by Prince Charles.'

' Oh, do tell me, what's he like ? '

' He's tall and young, grave and handsome. He saluted, with one hand held up to his helmet. He looked very red. I yelled with all my might : " Long live the King ! " And I felt quite dizzy with joy.'

' It was so splendid ? '

‘ Yes ! I couldn’t have seen anything better ! ’

‘ Oh, yes, there is something better,’ replied his sister. ‘ Haven’t you seen the Queen’s smile in the photographs ? ’

CHAPTER XIX

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

THE Queen had been to the Black Country, where the fire-damp had twice made terrible ravages, to console those who wept for their dead. Between their burnt eyelids the poor miners glimpsed her wonderful smile as she leant over them and their sufferings were soothed.

In the blue country of stories, where each evening her mother put her to sleep, Josephine Charlotte found again the peaceful vision of her grandfather, radiant with joy in that Paradise that had dazzled 'The Little Girl with the Matches.'

Once again the name of Albert was in everyone's heart when they spoke of giving that same name to the little Prince so soon to be born. So history repeats itself.

Albert came into the world on the day when the first roses opened in the flower-beds of Stuyvenberg.

He had received the title of 'Prince of Liège.' A famous title which conjured up

the glorious past of 'The Ardent City'; the magnificent reigns of the Bishop Princes, Notger the Sage and Lambert the Saint.

This birth was a joyous sign. On the day of his baptism the coaches were seen again with the red habits of the outriders and the golden reins, and although it was not Christmas the children had sung the song of the angels.

"The Child is born in Bethlehem, Alleluia.
Thus Jerusalem rejoices, Alleluia"

When the royal baby appeared a tremendous acclamation greeted him. The weather was radiant and a rain of flowers fell on the procession.

The good town of Liège had brought to the young Prince who bore its name, the fervour of its homage and many baptismal presents. There was a little flight of steps in bronze, made in Liège, which symbolised the freedom of the city; a goblet carved from the wonderfully pure crystal made at Saint Lambert and lastly the principal person of the popular marionette theatre, 'Tchantchès,' with his long red nose.

As it was strawberry time the people who lived in the marshes had sent a basket full of Saint Lambert strawberries, so-called (according to the old tale) after the old Bishop, fat and rosy, within whose jurisdiction the city once lay. As for the flower-sellers, who form

a corporation celebrated at Liège for their warm-heartedness, they wept into their bouquets for very joy. The urchins of the quarter 'Over There' were asking if they would be having the famous sweets made in the Town Colours : red and yellow.

Little Prince Albert didn't eat strawberries : he was much too small, but his brother and sister gave many a hopeful look at the basket, while Baudouin thought it disastrous that he couldn't make the acquaintance of 'Tchan-tchès' who had such a funny look and *such* a red nose !

* * *

On his baptismal day, however, the baby Prince Albert had been given many other titles as well as presents and good wishes. He had also been blessed with an incomparable godmother. He was called Albert-Elizabeth, because those names never go one without the other and also because Elizabeth has always meant 'refuge, consolation and gentleness.'

But Astrid the Queen had a secret about Prince Albert of Liège that she would not tell anyone—though she smiled whenever she thought about it.

CHAPTER XX

OUR LADY'S SMILE

YOU cannot enter the gates of Brussels or go into the forest or the country without finding, at a cross-roads, in the shadow of a wood or in the light of a clearing, a statue of Our Lady.

For three hundred years 'Our Lady of Hal,' black but beautiful, has watched over Brabant.

At the gates of the town is 'Our Lady of Consolation,' given long ago by Elizabeth of Hungary to the Carmelites for the comfort of the poor she loved.

There is also 'Our Lady of Montaigu' who, honoured at first in the trunk of an oak tree, was placed in a chapel built many hundreds of years ago by a Prince and Princess called Albert and Isabelle who were just and good.

Nearer the noisy town (in the chapel next to the crypt where sleep, for ever, the Kings and Queens of Belgium) you can go and pray to 'Our Lady of Laeken.'

On the edge of the forest, up on the hill,

rises the chapel of 'Our Lady of Alseberg.' This statue has a story which is intimately connected with the history of Belgium. They say that in 1230 the Queen of Hungary, was visited by an angel who asked her to build a church near Brussels, at Alseberg. At that time, all the country-side was covered with the blue of the flax flowers. The Sisters of the Convent generously gave up their field of azure, Our Lady's colour, so that the sanctuary might be built there. The daughter of Saint Elizabeth, Sophie Duchess of Brabant, made them the gift of the statue carved from a Hungarian hornbeam.

'Philip the Good,' when he was lost one day in the forest of Soignes, made a vow that he would endow the chapel with a stained-glass window if he found the right road again. Charles the Bold had beautified it by then, as also had Charles the Fifth. The greatest lords—Kings, Queens, Dukes, Marquises, Barons—came on pilgrimage. 'Our Lady of Alseberg' invariably seemed to attract the generosity and solicitude of Princes.

Astrid, Duchess of Brabant (called Astrid-Sophie, meaning wise), loved all these statues with the smiling faces. Seated in a chair and pressing the Divine Child against her heart, is not 'Our Lady of Alseberg,' more than any other, the picture of the happy mother?

On a bright August day they had crowned 'Our Lady of Alseberg': the purple of the

Cardinal's robe, the golden mitres of the Bishops; the red tunics of the Knights of the Order of Malta; the holiday dresses of all the historic personages; all made an unforgettable sight. *Those present seemed to see one* of those magnificent processions of the fifteenth century which were so splendid that the most illustrious Kings commissioned famous artists to commemorate them on their canvases.

The crowns encircling the foreheads of The Blessed Virgin and her Child were carved from the gold and precious stones which Queen Astrid had offered for that purpose.

Like that charitable Queen, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary; like Sophie, the other Duchess of Brabant, she had wished to preserve for ever the smile of The Mother and the vision of The Child for the consolation of those who are unhappy and for those who seek.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAGIC MIRROR

It was as if everything in the story of the Snow-Queen had come true. Misery had come upon the world and now faces were blank and hearts were hardened. People asked themselves if the demon had not got out his famous magic mirror again, of which the splinters went into men's eyes, making them see only wickedness, ugliness and evil—the black side of life and of humanity.

No one wanted to remember that earth held anything bright and good; that there was such a thing as neighbourliness; that courage was rewarded or that miracles *did* happen and the sun still shone. The children no longer went on joyous excursions nor heard stories and music: only the price of butter and the rate of exchange. When they admired something too much or cried too loud for anything they were not threatened with 'Old Bogey, Hans Scrouff,' or 'The Bad Fairy,' but with '*The Crisis*.'

Unlike those illustrious and terrifying per-

sonages 'The Crisis' did not arouse even their curiosity. They knew all about it : it was as boring as a rainy day and it wasn't difficult to imagine who it was like. Sometimes it was like an old aunt who only read the papers to gloat over all the awful things that had happened : sometimes it was like a cousin who thought so much about Bad Luck that Bad Luck only thought about him.

Even at the family table when the talk turned on the joint or a new coat, conversation inevitably came back to 'The Crisis,' so much so, in fact, that in the end the children merely became sulky or irritable.

Some people said what was really needed was another brave Gerda (like the story of the Snow-Queen) whose power came from a heart that was good and pure. She alone, perhaps, could overcome the evil effect 'The Magic Mirror' had had on the souls of men. She alone, maybe, could make men see once more how marvellous and splendid life really was !

However, there were other children who had suffered from 'The Crisis.' It had closed the factories, depriving the fathers of work and leaving mothers no money to go to market. Those children who were always starving longed with all their hearts for a fairy to come who would soften the scowl of the sorcerer.

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To conquer 'The Crisis,' to make it draw in its claws some wise men built up very clever 'economic contrivances' which they called plans. They hadn't read the Snow Queen and so they didn't know that it is best to begin by softening people's hearts so that they forget their own misery and take pity on that of others. Instead they quarrelled among themselves and only succeeded in adding to the general bad temper.

Queen Astrid, however, remembering the story of 'Little Kay' and of 'Gerda,' decided to do everything possible to deliver her people from the evils of 'The Magic Mirror.'

She was too sorry for words for the children who were tormented and starved by 'The Crisis.' So she sent out an appeal to the country. This appeal coming from a heart that was good and sincere was enough to make people kinder and more keen to dissolve the pieces of glass which made them see everything through bewitched spectacles.

She recollected that the Boy Scouts had organised, some time before, a Week of Optimism and, as she could not think of any better soldiers for the Crusade she was undertaking, she selected children to go from door to door in her name collecting clothes and food. They came back with lorries so full

that they had enough to fill several houses and their efforts were equally as successful in the country towns.

There was not a school where the children did not wish to sew or knit for the children who were cold and starving and, more especially, in the houses where babies were waiting to come into the world and that made the school-children less talkative and less occupied with themselves. The discontented women were so busy making woollen scarves that their tongues forgot to wag: the men were so keen to give their money that they had no time to read the financial news. *Everyone, in a word, became better, more just and more joyous, and so in the country, as a whole, misery lessened.*

Whoever wished to do so could go to the Palace to give their little gift. Very often the Queen was there, among the gifts and parcels of every kind, looking over, with pleasure, the mountains of overcoats, the seas of shoes and the piles of foodstuffs. She received everyone who came with eagerness and asked their name. But if children came, she always went to them, because the best of herself, whether they were rich or poor, belonged to them. They stared at her in amazement and delight. Although she did not wear her ermine mantle or her golden crown it was perfectly clear she was a Queen. And what a Queen!

It really was very odd. Everyone who came, big or little, with their gifts went away feeling they were richer than before. They had each received a wonderful present : the Queen's smile.

CHAPTER XXII

THE OFFERING OF THE SMILE

ALREADY there were trees in flower, although in one night the snow had transformed the spring scenery into a sad and desolate country-side.

Before it was quite light, Queen Astrid took the train to go to the flat country to visit the distressed families. People had told her that in Flanders little children were living whose fair hair was nearly white, the colour of the flax that is spun on the banks of the River Lys. There were so many of these poor mites, sometimes eight, nine and even thirteen in one house! Their fathers could not feed them any longer because 'The Crisis' had stopped the bobbins of the weavers.

Some lived on the outskirts of the old town of Courtrai or in the tortuous alleys of the surrounding slums while others lived in the villages along the French frontier.

'The Queen-ready-to-give-her-heart' went to visit them all: their distress reflected in her face. The motor which awaited her at

the station stopped in the streets which run well into the very soil and poetry of Western Flanders: the 'Street of the Flax-flower'; the 'Street of the Fire-pump'; the 'Street of Christ' and the 'Street of Guido Gezelle.'

She entered the little cottages of Courtrais, so fresh-looking with their red tiles and their little windows heavily curtained, and sat down between the hearth and the dresser where the crockery shone; looked at the certificates of First Holy Communions hung on the walls and the portraits of the old ancestors. She had no desire to begin long conversations: her language was that of all mothers. She took a baby in her arms, lifted the little girl's chin while she asked her name and made the last baby laugh. She guessed its age at once and compared its weight with that of her own little boy.

'Mine weighed eleven pounds at birth,' said the young Queen, and her mother's smile was like a ray of sunshine in the low room, making everything gay and charming.

The children suddenly thought of the Spring so near at hand, of the fields of flax that would soon flower again and the little light of hope was born again in the hearts of the parents.

'Everything will soon be better,' repeated the Queen in her melodious Flemish. Everyone knew it must be true because she said it with so much faith accompanied by a smile that was like Our Blessed Lady's!

As they advanced across the plain, immense and bare, the roads became more broken-up, the cottages poorer. To get to the huts she had to get out of the car and follow the muddy paths across wet fields. The Queen was untiring in pressing forward to find more children, always more children !

Now she entered into poor hovels. The door was so low that she had to bend her head while, clustered around their mother many children made a crown. As it is the custom in Belgium that the seventh child has the King for godfather and the seventh girl the Queen for godmother there were always, in these homes an Albert or a Leopold, an Elisabeth or an Astrid. . . .

'But we call her "Trida,"' added the mother.

This reminded the Queen of *her* childhood when Princess Ingeborg and her sisters had given her a familiar nickname too, that was renewed every day like a caress.

'Wherever do they all sleep?' asked Astrid.

'Up there,' the proud mother replied.

Then the royal mother asked if she might go and see. So she climbed the rickety ladder leading to the upstairs bedroom—the only one—and was not surprised to find the staircase so narrow, for she knew, from the sweet experience of her motherly heart, that the happiness of children does not depend on

the size of their nest, but on the warmth of the wing that covers them.

The Queen went into more than thirty houses. The villagers and the peasants, the school-children and the societies of old soldiers with their banners, all thronged the roads as she went by ; while infirm and aged women who had not left their arm-chairs for years lifted themselves up against the windows to see her pass.

' I too, I too, have seen the Queen,' sobbed an old grandmother who was nearly a hundred years old.

As the motor drew alongside the aerodrome at Wevelghem, a machine went up, blue and gold in the sunlight : like a reminder of the colours of Sweden over the Flemish countryside ; like a promise of alliance between Heaven and Astrid the ' Queen of the Poor.'

* * *

When the touching pilgrimage was over night had come and the snow was beginning to fall again, blinding and cold, so cold that it froze on the windscreen. At that hour, perhaps, Josephine-Charlotte was reading in the story-book the tale of the little girl who had nothing to warm her chilly fingers with but the heat of a few matches, but who, in that humble little flame saw more and more marvellous and beautiful things. . . .

THE OFFERING OF THE SMILE III

It was quite dark by now and in the immense plain around her the Queen could only guess the outline of the old mills and the gesture of their bare sails. Her feet were frozen, but her heart was burning with faith and compassion.

On the return journey she expressed a wish to visit the church at Comines. It was so sweet to her to visit the Child Jesus for it was He whom she saw in each of the other poor children and this thought made her serene and confident.

Before the smiling Virgin-Mother she laid down the offering of her smile: for her country; for her poor people; for all the little children. The little lamp of the Tabernacle shone in solitude and, in the shadow, the Queen's profile had something angelic about it.

The offering was accepted, but, only God knew that!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SIGN

SOON afterwards Queen Astrid returned to Stockholm, the 'City of Attraction.' She had found again the thread of her thoughts beneath the great trees of the summer garden. Sitting on the grass with her three children she could believe herself back again in the days when she played with her doll.

Josephine-Charlotte had begged her to kneel down on the grass and she was tying crowns of flowers on her head. The little house where Astrid, as a child, had prepared the 'smorbrods' and the coffee for her little friends was still there with its miniature furniture and its low oven. The only difference was that the little girl who ran up the staircase now had fair hair while the other had had brown curls. Their smiles, however, were so alike, that there was no difficulty in believing that the one continued the dream of the other inspired by the same affections.

'Aren't they lovely?' asked the Queen of Nenne, her old nanny, as she presented her three children for inspection.

Josephine-Charlotte looked with all her eyes at this famous Nenne who had looked after her mother and sisters so well when they had the chicken-pox. Nenne came closer while little Albert held out his arms to her and Baudouin smiled. Then Josephine-Charlotte put her arms round her mother's neck and whispered something very like a great secret.

'Do you know what Joe is saying, Nenne?' said the Queen. 'She is longing for you to stay with us for always. She knows how fond you are of little children!'

So Nenne stayed and it was like a corner of the blue sky of her childhood that Astrid had taken back to Belgium that day.

Once again Stockholm was decorated for another marriage: Princess Ingrid was to marry Prince Frederic, the son of the King of Denmark. Astrid and Leopold III had been received with great ceremony on this occasion—were they not King and Queen! They were surrounded by other Kings and Queens, too, in the procession which crossed the town of Stockholm bedecked with Belgian and Swedish colours. 'The Princess-ready-to-give-her-heart' had held her place in the memory of the good people.

'She is always our Astrid,' said some.

'Yes, and still more beautiful, still more radiant,' replied others. 'Since she has had children she has a really royal look—it's

obvious they are her crown, the crown she loves the best."

So they shouted: 'Hurrah for Belgium! Hurrah for Sweden!'

It was not the first time, however, that an alliance between two countries had been celebrated, for King Leopold had reminded them, in a speech he made, that exactly seven hundred years ago a Belgian Princess named 'Blanche of Namur' had sat upon the Swedish throne.

Three centuries later many Walloons came to settle in the Swedish villages. They had found wives there and had had children, so the Belgian and Swedish blood was mixed. Was not the Walloon accent, melodious and sweet, reborn on the lips of the Queen when she spoke French?

Thus the marriage of Princess Ingrid and of the son of the King of Denmark was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony in the church at Storkyrkan, which is one of the glories of Sweden. Astrid thought, meanwhile, of the day she bade farewell to her native land.

Among the wedding-presents on view at the Palace she had looked, for a long time, at a looking-glass for the dressing-table given by Prince Frederick. The face of a Queen in her prime and of that of a happy mother was reflected in it for a moment. Perhaps she had been unable to resist thinking of the

little girl she *had* been and of Alice in Wonderland for, like Alice, had she, too, not been through the looking-glass and had everything she found on the other side not turned out to be, at every step, happiness, enchantment and joy?

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GREAT FAIRYLAND

It was just as the first leaves in the parks of Brussels were beginning to put on their holiday attire that people started to talk about a Great Fairyland.

Naturally all the children were very glad, for they had never seen an International Exhibition before, although they noticed that their mothers and grandmothers often said : ' That was in the year of the Exhibition,' as if Exhibitions were useful things by which to remember certain stages in their lives.

They would be able to go all round the world without having to set sail in a ship or put foot in a train ! Already the flags of the furthest countries greeted them at the mast-heads.

It was like a story in *The Thousand and One Nights* : like a story that told of ever-new marvels. No wonder they dreamed of it every night !

The King and Queen came to open the fête : it was a grand sight. In the gardens

that flowered in a world of dreams ; in the wide walks, one of which bore her name, the Queen with her smile had struck the right note of song and gaiety.

She was truly such a Queen as few countries have ever possessed. The Turks, the Arabs and the Greeks said themselves that she was the loveliest among all the lovely Princesses of the East. The French declared that Monsieur Perrault had never invented a more resplendent fairy than Astrid.

The Italians thought she was like a beautiful Madonna, and the Spaniards swore that in the great procession of Seville she would have made a ' Madre ' more delicious than all the rest.

But the Swedes only repeated with pride : ' She is *our* Princess—our Princess of the Snows ! '

* * *

She came with the ' Blue Prince,' one day, to the little corner of the Exhibition which represented her native Sweden. The national hymn was played for them whilst a choir sang songs which celebrated the lakes and the pine trees ; the fjords and Stockholm the ' City of Attraction ' ; the white winters and the old sagas.

Astrid, recapturing the memories of her childhood and youth journeyed, in spirit, to the country of the lakes. Once again she saw

the forest, the heathland and the silver birches : once again she heard the nanny she cherished singing the ' Song of the Countries of the North,' while she rocked her in her arms.

Then, the little ' Princess of the Snows '—to-day a Queen—could not restrain her tears : great child-like sobs, sobs for the child she once had been who, across the seas, across the years, across everything had kept her heart still faithful.

One day a Children's Fête was held at the Exhibition at which many thousands of children were present. Princess Josephine-Charlotte and Prince Baudouin had never seen so many in their lives before. All belonged to that great association called ' The Red Cross of Youth,' which reunites (under the sign known all over the world) the children who wish to carry out its motto : ' To Serve ! '

They had come from every country, with their banners and their colours, with their many-coloured dresses and their many, differing faces.

There were Czechoslovaks and Chinese ; Ballillas as serious as Popes in black coats and blue scarves ; Greek Evzones with pleated kilts ; beribboned Alsatians and Polish children with feathers in their hats.

There were also the ' Juniors of Belgium ' from every Province ; troops of Boy Scouts

who saluted with three fingers of the right hand to their felt hats; Girl Guides with multi-coloured ties and little girls dressed all in white.

The little Royalties, seated in arm-chairs too large for them, watched them march past. They were both dressed, in honour of the Fête, in the uniform of the Juniors. So the grandchildren of the great chief of the Swedish Red Cross had made friends for good with the representatives of all the little children in the world.

* * *

Night had fallen and the illuminated fountains, from the Great Palace to the Entry of the Centenary, took on fantastic colours. It was the most fascinating hour of the Great Fairyland.

In the British Pavilion a ball was given in honour of the—then—Duke and Duchess of York. The King and Queen were there, and, on the lawn among the gladioli, Astrid was dancing crowned and robed like Undine in the legend. Her head was a little bent and she was smiling as though at some memory, no one knew what. Perhaps she was thinking of the night of her first ball when she was so shy and modest that she cried out: 'Oh, how frightened I am—what will happen if no one asks me to dance?'

The little Princess who had laughed when her governess, who was teaching her French, had said she might be a Queen one day had fulfilled that unexpected prediction—she *was* a Queen! Indeed, that night, she was doubly a monarch for she was also ‘Queen of the Dance.’ When she spoke with the Princes and the English officers she derived a secret pleasure from hearing again the language of the loveliest of all stories and, once more, she imagined herself in Wonderland.

What a joy it would have been, if, like Alice, she were able to eat the mushroom which made one the size of a dwarf and to drink of the bottle that rendered one invisible! The Queen thought of it each time she went, without anyone knowing, to the Exhibition.

With the King, she had been able to enjoy the nocturnal elfland of the forest in the Park. The history of the Past depicted in the cobbles and gables of old Brussels had enchanted her, for she loved the Capital of her Kingdom and it interested her to know how Brussels had smiled down upon her Princes of long ago.

She had wandered with her sister, one day, among the Pavilions and had known the pleasure of rubbing shoulders with the crowd. At first no one recognised her and she was so amused by it all she could not help smiling. But then, who, among a hundred, among a

thousand, would not have recognised the smile of the Queen ?

Another day there was a Battle of Flowers and a flowered chariot at the Exhibition. It was pouring. The Queen, however, came all the same for she never missed the chance of meeting the flowers. She loved them just as much when the rain bent their stalks and ruined their corollas, for then they were to be pitied all the more.

Her two little children, huddled under one coat, watched a procession that was all scents and colours. People were throwing marguerites, dahlias, carnations, pansies and roses. The bouquets crossed each other in the rain, but, in spite of the storm, the flowers sang a song of summer, for had they not seen the Queen ?

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE SINGING TOWN

IN Belgium there is a town that sings ! As Stockholm, by virtue of the ancient legends, attracts all men, so Liège fascinates them by the charm of her song.

Everything is done to the sound of song : singing, the fried-fish-and-chips man cries his wares ; the woodseller announces his and the rag-and-bone man asks for old clothes and any old iron.

Singing, the children go to school ; singing they play at hopscotch, tops or soldiers. They go singing in the procession on the eve of Saint Maucrawe's Feast—the Saint with the wooden head—for coppers to buy flowers to decorate the little altars of Our Lady in the façades called 'potaies,' whilst in all the houses of the popular quarters men sing to the accordion every evening. Even the workmen engraving the barrels of guns in their workrooms sing the old Wallonian ballads. Others make up their own, very pretty and sentimental, to sing to their friends.

The soldiers sing to encourage themselves as they climb the 344 steps of the stone stairway leading to the Citadel.

Cages are hung in every window and along every balcony with Saxon canaries and siskins singing away inside them.

On Sundays the Quai de la Batte is like an orchestra made up of the melodies and songs, the musical speech of the people and the notes of the birds. On the Place Verte, in the shade of yellow and red parasols, the flower-sellers make up their bouquets to the tune of the 'Song of the Walloons' and the grave Dutchmen, who come along the river in barges, voice their astonishment at the volume of song on the banks of the Meuse. It almost seems as if the Meuse itself begins to sing as soon as it enters the valley. In the heart of the city the Ourthe, which has flown for hours among the laughing hills, comes to mingle its happy little ditty with the chant of the flowing river.

* * *

'The Singing Town' woke up on morning singing more gaily than ever. It had the very best reason for doing so, for the King and Queen were to make their joyous entry that day.

It was as though the greatest days in the history of Liège were back again. The decorated streets were a harmony of bright colours :

the cock rampant, red on a field of gold, seemed ready to crow his most deafening and most friendly cock-a-doodle-doo and the crowd waited, trembling with excitement.

More thrilled than everyone else, the sharp little urchins who lived in the back-street where the famous Grétry was born, and in other popular streets, waited, perched on street-lamps on which they had hung garlands and rows of streamers the night before. They even knew how many there were as well as the number of triumphal arches for they had made the round of the town three times without stopping for an instant to whistle 'The Valorous Man of Liège' which a brass band had been playing over and over again these last three days.

At last, the bugles sounded. The King and Queen entered the coach and the winding, superb procession moved off amid the most ardent acclamations of the city. But it was the Queen's smile above all that gave rise to the most frenzied cheering. To reply to the good people, the gestures of her hand became even more cordial than usual. The people of Liège had longed to grace one of the most radiant pages in their history with this young Queen, so lively, so gay and so beautiful. Now here she was among them with her radiant smile!

When, a little later, the Queen entered the Cathedral to hear Mass and the children's



'She had wished to show Prince Albert to the people of Liège.'

voices chanted 'Thou art all fair . . . Draw us unto thee!', that chant dedicated to the 'Most Adorable of Mothers' became a moving symbol; a prayer; a blessing.

When the King and Queen had come out of the church in front of 'The Virgin of Delcour' (so maternal in her royal mantle and her gesture of protecting love) a clamorous 'Brabançonne' rang out from the old belfry amidst the enthusiastic cheers which swelled anew like the waves of the sea.

They were redoubled when the Sovereigns, having crossed the bridges, came into the surging and tumultuous quarter of the Republic of Outre-Meuse. And the children who had admired Charlemagne the Great, Oger the Dane and the Four Sons of Aymon at the Imperial Theatre of Roture—where the celebrated Tchanchès reigns supreme—all agreed that they had never seen anything so splendid or so marvellous as the plucky, young King and the smiling Queen in the midst of the brilliant cavalcade.

* * *

At the entrance into the old Town Hall—called 'La Violette' which faces the steps of Liège—the Queen, without having told anyone, came out to her people. From the heights of 'La Violette,' facing the steps, in this frame of holiday-making and liberty, she had wished

to show Prince Albert to the people of Liège herself: their little Prince, with hair that curled like an angel's.

This surprise was a secret she had hidden for a long time in her heart.

The people of Liège were moved to tears and the flower-sellers offered her all their flowers in gratitude for this kindly thought, and the oldest of them all, dressed in her best shawl and apron, climbed the steps towards the Queen. But she could not say the words she had so carefully prepared. Dazzled by the smile of this radiant mother she could only talk to her of her beauty:

'You are so beautiful,' she stammered. 'You are so beautiful that I would like to kiss you!'

The Queen took the sheaf of flowers and leaned towards the face that was as wrinkled as a pippin in the cellar, for she remembered having said one day: 'If I were not a Queen, I would like to be a flower-seller.'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE HOLIDAYS

THE little word 'holidays' meant great things: rest for the King, pinker cheeks for the little ones and the happy hours they all spent together.

The Queen's joy was so commingled with that of others that she rejoiced at the sound of blinds being let down and of trunks being done up.

They went to meet the great winds of the open country at the little villa of Zoute with the transparent shutters, for Astrid loved the sea.

Neither the Undine of the legend nor the little Water-nymph of the story had lost the memory of the Palace of Crystal which had enchanted their childhood and awakened their desire for immortal things. It was a ship just like the one which appeared on the horizon now, that had carried Astrid to her Prince and to her new country. Since then, two ships had borne the name of ASTRID over the grey waters. So many memories already and such delightful ones!

The Queen lay on fine sand. The children, not far away, were building a castle that the next tide would inevitably destroy. Yet they wanted to construct still more castles for there would be more incoming tides. . . .

It was like the story of 'The Wild Swans': 'I too,' said little Elise, 'I too will be as untiring as the waves.'

Astrid smiled, for she remembered often having said when she was small: 'I, too, feel myself turning into a wild swan: soon I shall fly away over the sea. . . .'

A fisherman in a red smock and orange trousers was mending his boat. He was like the old sailor with whom Astrid had spent many years of her youth, for he told her stories of fishing-grounds far away and of the voyages he had made. She was never tired of listening, for she had always been greedy for stories. One evening when she went away from the humble abode of the old sea-dog she told him that she could quite understand how, being able to draw on such memories, he was content with the solitude of his little house.

Now she, too, had memories which made the tiny country that had become her own a place of enchantment and a Wonderland.

It was time for a bathe.

Josephine-Charlotte loved to hear how frightened her mother had been the first time her father, the 'Blue Prince,' had made her

stand up to a wave. He had explained that, as *he* was there, she need not be afraid of the sea, so beautifully edged with foam.

'Oh, but it is so large, Papa,' Astrid had replied, 'and I am so small!'

Josephine laughed. It was *too* funny to think that Mother had been a little girl too. She wished she could have been small at the same time as her mother: how well they would have got on together.

As a flight of seagulls alighted on the beach her mother said to her: 'When I was your age, I went up to a scagull one day, just like that one. Very softly, oh, very softly. It didn't seem to be afraid so I talked to it. I was always angry with my governess because she made the scagulls fly away just when I was sure it was going to answer me.'

There was nothing surprising about that for one of Nils Holgersson's country-folk, 'as, if you are only small enough the birds will talk to you.'

Then there were many other marvellous things.

Every evening the Queen could send her 'Good night' to the 'Princess Sunbeam' far away, and she heard, as in her childhood, that dear voice saying: 'Good night, good night, little girl!'

Very often, too, she took a large sheet of writing-paper, that she covered with her large, clear hand-writing to ask the King's

mother for advice. The letter went quickly, quickly by aeroplane or by train and at last arrived with the tang of the North Sea in it, carrying a ' Good morning ! ' from the little Royalties and the messages of Queen Astrid to Queen Elizabeth, to Princess Marie-José and to the little Princess Maria-Pia who lived in the country of the orange-blossom.

* * *

Sometimes the King liked to go to the Ardennes, where there are thick forests and murmuring rivers.

He fished for hours. The Queen, too, remembered fishing for crayfish and was very proud, when she was still Duchess of Brabant, of casting her first fly.

She loved to go into the heart of the pine forest to get the sprigs of heather that smelt of honey. Frightened deer crossed the clearings like a flash of lightning, and the rabbits, as she went deeper into the woods, ran off to their holes when they saw her coming.

The Queen asked the village priest if she might keep the key of the little Chapel. The peasants often came to pray at the grill and put pennies there for Our Lady's altar. She considered it a privilege and an honour to be the only one to arrange the flowers and replace the used candles.

The Ardennes are full of legends of were-

wolves, of sorcerers and witches, so full, in fact, that they would prevent a child from sleeping if it heard of them. But, as if to make up for these, the sounds and scents that come from the forest in the evening are enchanting.

In their little beds, Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin breathed deeply of the pine-scented air and listened to the bird-calls while their mother told them their bedtime-story. Then she kissed them as only a mother can. Her cheek was so soft that they loved winding their cool, little arms about her neck and to nestle their sleepy heads against her heart as all the perfumes of the forest were wafted through the open window.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DAILY ROUND AND THE DREAM-ROAD

LIKE the seagulls in the blue air, the days flew by, came again and flew away.

From early morning, the Queen's smile shed a light on every heart and over all the house. This light it was which came to caress the little children when they first awoke, with the promise of a bright and happy day.

The Queen herself was often discovered puzzling over the menu in search of the nicest things for them to eat.

Like the birds, the children darted merrily about the garden. If it was winter, they remembered the battles with snowballs; the slides and the games that Lieutenant Ernst Killander had organised for mother and the other children when Astrid was a little girl. The Queen often told them about it and Josephine-Charlotte frequently in her turn, imagined herself a little 'Princess of the Snows.'

In the summer there was a sandpit down

the walks and the song of the wheelbarrow. Nothing, however, was more amusing than the jolly picnics in the wood when they listened to the stories about Fridhem. The Queen herself carried the basket of food where they often found one of those delicacies of which she seemed to possess the secret.

This love of the Queen for her little ones was so profoundly sincere that its warmth brought to flower the seed of charity in their hearts.

Close to the Church of Saint Michael in Brussels there is an old beggar who tells a touching story.

One day, he says, a fair little girl wanted to give him everything she had in her purse. It happened that the old man, who repeatedly lingered in front of shop windows to admire the portraits of the Royal Family, guessed at once that she was none other than Princess Josephine-Charlotte. Then, while she visited the church with the almoner who accompanied her, he went to buy her a humble bunch of flowers and offered it to her as she came out. Not knowing how to thank him the little Princess made him her deepest curtsy: had not her mother told her that all poor persons, because of their misery and destitution, should be revered for their likeness to The Child Jesus who had been cold and hungry. . . .

The next day the old beggar received, with an accompanying present, a long letter from

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the Queen thanking him for his goodness to her little girl.

Because of this letter, says the old beggar, his life is full of joy.

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Just as the swallows were building their nests in April, under the cornice of the Chapel, Josephine-Charlotte herself met the Child Jesus when she made her first Holy Communion kneeling between the King and Queen. When she returned everyone was impatient to see who would be the first person she kissed, for they say in Belgium that the first person to receive the kiss of a little child who has made its First Holy Communion is sure of all Heaven as a reward.

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Astrid the Queen wove about the King days of gold and benedictions : she smiled at him and the blackbirds of worry flew far away. She herself put his study in order, that order which makes work easy because it gives rest while relieving strain. With that same attention to detail women have, she classified and arranged the collections of insects and plants which the King delighted to amass. Every day she put bunches of flowers everywhere, arranging them with her

own hands, and often kneeling in the Hall with a sort of devotion. Wherever the King looked she ensured that flowers should be smiling at him. To Astrid—who spoke little and smiled much—flowers taught people the joy of giving oneself to the service of others and of living in the sunshine.

Sometimes, when grave ministers and solemn personages were gathered together discussing affairs of State round a table in the Palace, the Queen came in to ask the King if he were not tired—and the King, his face suddenly relaxing, would say: ‘She is my ray of sunshine.’ Then the grave ministers and solemn personages bothered no longer about their notes and wrote no more figures on the enormous sheets of paper spread out before them, but wrote on their hearts instead this magnificent phrase in the knowledge that it would never be erased.

Thus, by her thoughtfulness for the small details of life and by her smile, Queen Astrid built up her reputation for tenderness. Like the legend of Uppland and Stockholm it was made up of all the bits and pieces the other people wasted.

Marie-José, the Princess with the golden locks, said of her: ‘Astrid always has her eyes open to see what would give pleasure to others.’

The servants declared they had never seen a single wrinkle of annoyance on her fore-

head. She had such a kind way of asking for something that one longed to give her much more still—the ‘Blue Moon,’ in fact, if she had wanted it.

However, when the heart of a wife and mother is very big it overflows with so much love and tenderness that all those who know it or hear it spoken of feel themselves within its rays. Astrid had built a nest where her family were in comfort, but her wings were larger than her nest.

That was why she tried to make so many people better and happier. The secret visits she made to the poor; the special gentleness she showed the ill and infirm; the pleasure she gave to others by her agreeable surprises—even to that delightful plan of asking two little girls who admired the Palace to come and play in the garden—what was all this but a sign of her constant charity and goodness?

‘I interest myself, more especially, in those who suffer, or who are ugly in some way,’ she once explained, ‘because they are doubly in need of tenderness and love!’

When she watched the seagulls Astrid needed no longer to wish for their wings: her own had never stopped growing and no one was able to measure the extent of their flight.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON ROSE-COLOURED CLOUDS

THAT summer the King and Queen went to the land of the blue lakes, white mountains and seas of ice. Like his grandfather the Count of Flanders; like King Albert whom they called 'King of the Peaks'; Leopold the Third loved Switzerland. He went there sometimes in the winter, when he wished to have the Princess of the Snows all to himself. With her he went off towards the heights and in the little hut that serves as a refuge and a resting-place up there, they went to sleep beneath the stars.

Astrid especially loved the charm of Switzerland when it was dressed in its smiling summer dress. The cyclamen that she picked on the mountain-sides was rare and lovely. A sky that seemed bluer than before above the eternal snows merely intensified her longing to fly.

The King and Queen often set out at dawn, their rucksack crammed with provisions and

nailed shoes. The guides said they had never met a better or braver climber than Leopold the Third, while Astrid had all the qualities of the best sporting companion: plucky and confident in him who guided her. They crossed the paths of the shepherds, neither refusing to drink from the same flask of sour wine nor to share the same chunk of hard bread. What lovely souls those shepherds and mountain-folk had; so enchanting, so full of poetry, and how they could talk of the heavens, of angels and star-clusters!

Dreamily, the Queen came home one evening to Haslihorn—the village where Josephine-Charlotte and Baudouin were awaiting her. They had run about so much chasing each other round the pond where the fountain shook down its drops of light: they had run along the chestnut-drive as far as the toolshed and escaped on to the Common, where there were the best hiding-places for playing 'hide and seek' and 'the disappearing dwarf.' They stopped in front of the Park, for a red rose was just coming out, but on seeing their mother they rushed towards her with cries of joy and struggled to be the only one to make a fuss of her. How they loved her! They felt their little souls melting when she took them on her knee and whispered all the funny little words she had invented for them alone. They declared no one else was lucky enough to have such a young and beautiful mother.

Still Josephine had just found two white hairs !

Wasn't that a sign ? She had heard that old people soon die and old people's heads are covered with silver hair.

' I think Mother's going to die soon,' murmured the little girl, ' she's got two white hairs ! '

And the Queen in her daily letter to Princess Ingeborg had repeated these words and it was easy to guess at her immortal smile as the message was dispatched on its journey.

Next day the little Royalties woke up to a great sorrow, the sorrow of having to leave Haslihorn ; the chestnut-drive ; the firs and the carpets of white flowers round the little palm trees ; above all, the sorrow of leaving their mother for a few days. Still there would be Stuyvenberg again and Thomasine and the marionette that Monsieur Peruchet had given them. Josephine-Charlotte who would be eight next autumn took back with her, however, a promise that she could have her meals with her parents after that happy day. Baudouin believed he was to have the bicycle at last that he had been promised for *such* a long time. All the same the nursery door, which was never shut, would now be closed for several nights and they would not hear their mother come tiptoeing into their room.

It was so sad, too, to have the stories interrupted like this : she knew such lovely ones and was always willing to begin them all over again.

For the last time, the children had filled the red drawing-room with their clear voices : for the last time their tiny feet had clattered down the wooden staircase.

They crossed the garden with their mother. In the Park, the red rose was nearly open. The dog barked, dragging at his chain. Poor fellow, he won't be going out to-day ! In a few moments the train will be rushing along the shining roads, far away, far away towards Belgium.

On the platform, the mother kissed the two little travellers as big tears fell from her eyes. It was always like this when she was separated from the children : she could not help crying.

Long ago, when she had gone to the ' Land of the Sun,' as soon as she arrived in Java she insisted on telephoning for news of her little girl who was then a baby. She had thought she heard her crying at the other end of the wire and was only just prevented from taking the first boat back, so greatly worried was her mother's heart.

Her mother's heart was bruised again when the porters (with their corded caps and red shoulder-belts) slammed the door.

The handkerchiefs waved like two butterflies at the ends of the little gloved paws.

Through her tears one could guess the smile : ' Mother ! '

' Good-bye, little children, good-bye ! '

CHAPTER XXIX

FOR EVER AND EVER

IN the misty morning, Astrid the Queen set off. She was close to the King, so close that their Angels heard their hearts beating together as they went along. The motor was humming, humming. . . .

The Swiss chalêts with their red roofs ; the white line of the horizon ; the trees and the meadows all went by like a flash. Great birds were flying over the lake.

Astrid the Queen was bending over the map where the blue and pink lines mark the roads towards the lovely gardens of the world. She followed these blue and pink lines and the perfectly straight line which, outside Kussnacht, showed their own road. The road was this long ribbon, unwinding . . . unwinding. . . .

* * *

. . . Suddenly there was a great noise and a splendid light.

* * *

All at once the ribbon turned into the one that little Astrid was putting in her brown curls. 'Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!' The guard was marching by: the china shepherdess became a scagull which flew past on outstretched wings while Astrid was sliding on the frozen lake supported by the 'Blue Prince.'

She fell down.

Suddenly she was sitting under the oak in the old summer garden and she heard the voice of the 'Princess Sunbeam' calling 'Nenne!'

Oh, what a marvellous blue butterfly flying away: that was Sweden that had found its wings again. Wings! . . . The little girl had put on her white dress and was reading over again the bit about the dance of the cranes on their playground:

'All those who had wings and those who had none aspired to rise above the clouds and seek that which lay behind them; to abandon the heavy body which dragged them earthwards and to fly away towards Heaven. . . .'

A puff of wind turned the page over. There was Gerda in 'The Snow Queen.' Astrid was in Wonderland. What were all those bells? A wedding? Astrid has the veil of the Queen Desirée on her head and it changes all at once into the baptismal robe of a little child. It is Astrid's last day at the Infant Welfare Centre.

She comes back to the red drawing-room crying: 'Mother, is there anything more terrible than to leave a child one loves?'

Children: there are so many in the little, low houses of Flanders but they will not be hungry any more. No—'Our Lady of Comines' is resplendent: she has accepted the offering for Belgium. The Great Cardinal still watches over Astrid: 'What does it matter, Madam, if there still remains the smile of a Queen?'

Her Bible lies on the table open at 'The Song of Songs.' A sentence is underlined. 'Until the day break and the shadows flee away. . . .'

The trumpets sound: the trumpets of the Cherubim. It is 'Albert the Great,' the 'Hero of the Saga,' who has come to fetch the young mother.

'Mother!' Two little hands wave from the door. Josephine-Charlotte kissed mother first: all Heaven shall be her reward!

Baudouin the little King: Albert has taken his first step: he has curly hair like an angel—yes—just like an angel. . . .

So many angels are around Astrid just now and she sees all this life and all the next in the great light that shines. It is more exquisite than a story; more melodious than a song.

So many angels. . . .

The three little children. . . .

The King.

'Astrid! Astrid!' said the King.

She opened her eyes—eyes of that tender, golden colour of the roses one picks at the second flowering in August.

She opened them a second time.

Then she closed them—for ever!

* * *

Now the three little children had a mother who would be always young—always. The people in their homes said that Astrid's life was like that of the Little Saint of Lisieux who was so simple and who contented herself by smiling. . . .

A life scented like a garden. . . .

A rain of roses had fallen and there were roses and still more roses: lilies and Parma violets from all the corners of the earth, from Kings and from the most humble people.

* * *

A great carpet of flowers stretched from the royal Palace, where the body of Astrid the Queen rested, to the feet of 'Our Lady of Laeken' who had opened her mantle.

For the world and for all the little children of the world, Astrid would for ever remain the 'Queen of Smiles.'

And all this, children, really happened!

